

COMPACT
SF

sf impulse



CHRIS BOYCE

THE RIG

sf impulse

Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

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Editorial by Kyril Bonfiglioli

This one is for goodbye. When I first lowered myself into the groaning editorial chair we were called **SCIENCE FANTASY**, appeared every other month and were already sentenced to that limbo into which so many good magazines have vanished. We now appear monthly, have a neater name, a bigger circulation, many more words per issue, one of the best cover-images in the business and are generally thriving. The next step in our progress to the top is an internationally-known editor and a full-time managing editor. We now have them and it's time for me to bow myself out.

As from next issue **IMPULSE** has **HARRY HARRISON** as Editor-in-Chief and **KEITH ROBERTS** as Managing Editor—both professional writers, both with editorial experience and both, oddly enough, former professional artists. I cannot think of a more promising team, nor one more likely to bring **IMPULSE** clear to the top both in turn-out and contents. I know that everyone who wishes science-fiction and fantasy well will be greatly cheered at the news.

For myself—and I think I may talk about myself in my last editorial—my feelings are suitably mixed. I am very sorry that I shall no longer be a dim asteroid revolving in the heavens of science-fiction for my experience of writers, agents and publishers has been pleasant and stimulating. I am glad that I shall have no more deadlines to meet or proofs to read. I shall be sorry never again to have the privilege of being the first to print a promising new writer: I remember the thrill of first seeing something of mine in print and have been very happy to share this experience again and again with contributors to **IMPULSE**. I am very glad indeed never again to have to pin a rejection-slip to a **MS** or to write one of those “thankyou, but not thankyou” letters to someone who is trying desperately hard but doesn't quite make it. I shall be sorry never again to receive those letters—friendly, cranky, spiteful, admiring, rude, solemn and sometimes just plain potty. I shall be very glad to sit back and remember what fun it all was.

Anyway, as I said at the beginning, good-bye.

CRITIQUE—3

by Harry Harrison

I have before me a curious volume that might be described as a bible of Manichean science fiction, containing all that is both good and bad in this form of literature. Mani taught that all life was a struggle between the powers of darkness and light, and that struggle is all too evident in this book—with darkness winning most of the time. We must hope that the author, Isaac Asimov, will not be flayed to death for his heresy as was the prophet Mani.

Firstly, we cannot blame the Good Doctor Asimov for all the darkness in *FANTASTIC VOYAGE* (Dennis Dobson, 21s.) since the sharing of guilt—or credit—is made clear on the title page. I quote this in its entirety, since it makes better reading than many parts of the book.

"*FANTASTIC VOYAGE*, a novel by Isaac Asimov based on the screenplay by Harry Kleiner, adapted by David Duncan from the original story by Otto Klement and Jay Lewis Bixby."

As they say in Hollywood—Wow! A list of credits like this must be read back to front, like the nomenclature of a military weapon, to make any sense. (Bolt stud pin spring retaining nut washer lock is a teeny piece of fibre that holds the washer on the nut that holds the spring that secures the spring, etc., etc.) The bit of fibre here appears to be a short story by Klement and Bixby. Klement is a name unknown to me, but Jerry Bixby is a writer of very good sf, as well as being a virtuoso of the bar piano. They must have written a story, published it undoubtedly, and become involved with one David Duncan. He appears to have done a treatment of the story, an expansion and pushing around of the original idea to adapt it for the screen. About this time the idea was flogged to a film company and this chap

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New author Boyce's story GEORGE proved so popular we immediately asked him for a longer and better one. This is both, and topical too.

THE RIG

by Chris Boyce

"You look disgusting."

Plus raw ill and nauseated into the bargain.

"Yes. I was sick in the helicopter, Sir Martin."

From behind his desk he looks up at you with his black button eyes. He is a little man, but taller than you, bald with tufts of wiry white hair above the red protruding ears, and sitting in an overstuffed armchair, his small chubby hands folded across his pot belly, he worries the cuff of his right sleeve with his left thumb.

"Couldn't you have changed or cleaned yourself up? Good God, man, you're smelling!"

"I know sir. Soya beans with . . . garlic powder."

—Delicious too.

"Ugh. Clear out of my office and don't come near me or the lab shack until you're decent. Understand?"

Nod.

"Yes Sir Martin."

"Clear off I said, Mr. Jalovec. Clear off!"

Walk nippily out of the door.

Out to where the mad sea winds howl round the rig in wild glee, and Scotland lies ninety miles westward. Look over the rail, down to where the heavy grey waves burst themselves to bubbles and cream against the scum covered expanse of the sea lily.

The sea lily extending wide and darkly about this island of steel on stilts. Afloat down there, all three of its broad enormous leaves spreading out from where they are an-

chored to the legs of the rig. Hundreds of feet across lying out on the North Sea.

What is it? An offbeat green fungus with a twisted sense of humour maybe?

Unlikely.

But that is what you are here to find out.

The popular press christened it 'Sea Lily' even although it bears not the slightest resemblance to the actual marine plant of that name.

And of course everyone has his own pet theory about it.

A plant spore blown high above the Martian atmosphere by a volcanic eruption is caught up in the current of Mariner IV's radio signals to earth and is carried across space to drop into the North Sea almost a year later.

Radioactive waste from a nuclear submarine mutates a common seaweed into a flat glaucous leviathan.

This oil rig 'Sea Horse' while drilling loosed from some deep sub-strata a buried seed belonging to a species of marine life which became extinct over one thousand million years ago.

It's this younger generation, the Devil, and the hydrogen bomb.

Maybe it is this younger generation.

A hoax.

That is the only explanation that might make sense.

Now what college or university has a 'rag day' about now. Coming to think on it some of those samples which you had flown in from here definitely looked as if they had been tampered with.

Your shoulder is being shaken. The second radio operator with straggly long brown hair dangling over his pale quartzose face.

"What are you hanging over the edge for? Are you going to be sick again?" trying to get upwind from you.

At the mention a small hairy goblin skips up your large intestine and starts to thump the wall of your stomach with sadistic gusto.

"Well if you're not going to spew come on with me. I'm starving with the cold out here and I'm dying to climb into my kip."

Once inside you move along straight narrow passages,

the constant grumble of the drilling sounding louder here with no winds to disperse it. The noise seems to quiver from the chairs in the saloon as you pass, from the beds in the dormitory, from the floorboards ceiling and walls.

"This is your place."

The cabin door is pushed aside to reveal what looks like a converted cupboard with table, chair, and make-shift bunk-bed.

"Wash those clothes pretty soon mister, or they'll stink you to death in this wee hole."

He leaves.

Good advice. Off with the macintosh and start peeling those sticky drawers away from your pallid greasy thighs. The stench curls up into your nostrils again. Your guts palpitate excitedly.

—Hold your breath, lad.

As the pressure swells you stumble frantically for the sink, grab it by the sides, and imagine the bilious face of Sir Martin Amherst gawking up at you from the plug-hole . . .

Smile.

—Standby for torpedoes . . .

. . . FIRE ONE . . .

. . . FIRE TWO . . .

(messy misfire that time.)

. . . FIRE THREE . . .

". . . aaah."

—Cherish the thought.

After a half hour of washing, scrubbing with a nailbrush, and general redressing you start out for the lab shack to meet the other two research scientists working with the lily mystery. Rounding a corner you are confronted with a grinning faceful of semi-decayed teeth.

"Ah. You'll be Jalovec, old Goodwin's replacement."

"Yes."

"Oh good. I'm Ernest Prescott. We'll be working together with Dr. Daily."

Shake his offered hand with your friend-confidant type grip.

"I may be wrong but weren't you a couple of forms below me at Scarsdale, Jalovec?"

"You must be mistaken. I went to Uddingston Grammar, outside Glasgow."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

A small silence.

"I, er, I read your paper on the spawning season of the *Idiocranthus Fasciola*, fascinating Dr. Prescott."

"It was rather good wasn't it? Three years of work went into that you know."

"Really?"

"Yes, but it was worth it in the end of course. Now if you'll follow me I'll take you out to the lab shack. This way Mr. Jalovec."

Up a steel ladder, through a hatch, and onto the top of the rig. The sound of the drilling diminishes slightly and rises a little in pitch from a muffled groaning to a grating mechanical overture. Over there the derrick is glistening where the hard white evening lights shine on its towering drizzle wet struts. The web of a titan black spider run mad.

"What progress have you made so far?" Shouting at him through the wailing wind.

"Practically none I'm afraid . . . can you hear me?"

"Just."

"The work is terribly frustrating, you know. I think that's what finally became too much for old Goodwin. Nervous breakdown. He's in a funny-factory now."

"How did it happen?"

"Well he started acting jittery, talking to himself and so on, decidedly odd. Then one evening—Here we are you go through first."

"Thank you."

—Yumm. Lovely inside. Cumfy and warm.

"Hang your raincoat up on the arm of that switch. We never use it. Anyway, about Goodwin.

"One night about three weeks ago he climbed down onto the lily with a gallon drum of ethyl alcohol and an axc. Started chopping away at the flesh and pouring alcohol into the wounds. Screaming and sobbing all the time. Sounded like someone being tortured to us. That is why we ran out to see what was going on, and looked down just as he set light to it all.

"Luckily we managed to extinguish the flames before

any serious damage was done. Poor fellow. He kept babbling on about the lily being out to enslave him, enslave us all. He was put under heavy sedation and flown away next day."

—Always knew Goodwin was turned
He would beat his wife because
He could 'hear' her being
Unfaithful to him in her
Dreams.
Psychic,
Or psychotic.

"Dr. Daily?"

"I'm over here Ernest, at the Stereoscan."

—Woman's voice.

She steps out from behind the enamelled bulk of the electron microscope. Gaze vacuously into these long lashed green eyes, and the red hair falling in a volcanic cascade across her brow and shoulders.

—Perfect everything.

Nice, very nice.

She reaches out and clasps your hand. Her fingers seem to fasten themselves into your skin like steel spring-clips, leaving white marks slowly turning red. Amazed you stare at your hand flexing it slowly, painfully, while the lady regards you with a look of cool satisfaction.

—God. She's strong.

"Has Ernest been acquainting you with our lack of progress—"

"I've told him how frustrating it is Fenella."

"Have you told him how you still aren't sure yet whether it's fauna or flora, but then you are rather stupid in a charming sort of way. I personally don't think that it's either frankly."

"UH?"

"Don't stand there with your mouth open like a mute midget, Jalovec my love. Look intelligent. Do something. Here, read these."

She pushes a pile of pale yellow papers into your arms.

"Our reports for the past two months."

"But I've read them, Dr. Daily."

"That's what you think, little friend. Take a look at, er. . . Here this will do for an example. What is it?"

Long look.

Upside down?

More long looks.

Thinks:

Stinks.

"It looks like a photograph of a chloroplast."

"Clever boy, but have you ever seen chloroplasts two inches across?"

"But that's impossible. They're microscopic . . ."

"A lot of things are impossible, like an organism with no nucleic acids, no enzymes, no proteins. Correct Ernest?"

"Oh, yes quite correct. Even the chlorophyll in those giant chloroplasts is new to us. It isn't type *a* or type *b*, and it has far too much magnesium in it for my liking."

"We send samples away with every helicopter but they only lead to confusion."

"I don't understand Dr. Daily. All the samples that were flown in to us contained traces of all these things which you say are missing. Furthermore we didn't receive any samples containing chlorophyll or these chloroplasts."

"Naturally. Sweet Sir Martin has strong views about what is biologically 'right' and 'wrong', so he spends all his time up in his little office 'doctoring' all the land bound samples. Mental corrosion. He's only fit for politics. Am I right, Ernest?"

"Of course, Fenella. The only reason he's here is because he got in everyone's hair at the Maxwell Research Unit."

"When we came out at first he was madly enthusiastic, but now with his imagination exhausted, his potential is completely depleted. His liquor cabinet however has become the centre of activity, for him by day and for another party by night. A party who always manages to sneak in about twice a week and become blind drunk. Don't you Ernest darling?"

"Why, eh? . . . well, er . . ."

"You see Jalovec the crew despise poor Ernest and Sir Martin is not pleased with his work, and to crown it all

I have not fallen victim to his irresistible charms. It's all just too much for your delicate ego isn't it my sweet?"

"Really, ha, ha. Fenella you will have your little jokes. The trouble with Sir Martin is simply that the Minister is making things uncomfortable for him. It makes him irritable."

"And what about the crew? I suppose that the geologists are jealous of your doctorate, and the rest simply envy your intelligence and education."

"Well, yes. It's obvious. Isn't it?"

"To you it is."

"To anyone, Fenella. Why most of them are just superstitious seamen. Why they even think that the pull of the ocean currents on the sea lily will bring the rig down, Jalovec."

—GULP!

Thinking of 'Sea Gem'.

Something like a dozen people

Dead.

"B-b-but no report of this has been made to the Ministry Dr. Prescott. Nobody t-told me."

She turns from Prescott and smiles at you, amused.

"Dear, oh dear. You've upset the little one Ernest. No, Jalovec, you haven't been notified of this simply because adamant Amherst dismissed the idea and conveniently lost those reports which we submitted on the subject. Don't let it upset you though, the rig is quite safe. Only now big Beattie, the rig boss, has sent a coded message to States-Lever saying that their precious three million pounds worth of oil rig is ready for the deep six. So when they confront the Minister with this news, his surprise will only be surpassed by his fury, I imagine."

"And what is Sir Martin doing about that, Doctor?"

"The dear old gentleman is at the moment frantically typing out an emergency briefing to be radioed to his superiors, denying that the rig is in danger of even having work halted for a few hours never mind being brought down."

"So the Minister will dismiss States-Lever, and we'll be stuck out here after all."

"Ah, the thought of working with us on this most

challenging exciting project doesn't stimulate you then, Jalovec?"

"Oh . . . no no, it isn't that at all Dr. Daily . . ."

"My, my, how you squirm, but don't worry. The Minister will crack. Won't he Ernest?"

"Well, er, yes, I think."

"Of course he will you bevel brain. The oil company will rake up all it can find on the 'Sea Gem' disaster for public support. Then they'll throw some nasty figures into Whitehall, like two hundred and fifty pounds per hour for stoppages, or about six thousand a day. Of course the loss of the rig would cost millions.

"No, I don't think the Minister will dismiss States-Lever at all. In fact I believe that the sea lily is in the last twenty-four hours of its illustrious mysterious existence."

Prescott is looking at her, pained.

"But Fenella, that means that you and I will be split up, after all these weeks here, together . . ."

"Mmm pity isn't it? Until that does happen though we may as well keep ourselves busy with some work. You go on reading through those reports Jalovec."

See how she moves, like a lynx. Prescott is gaping at her, his eyes two burning studs imbedded in his face, 'LUST' stamped on his forehead in four inch high fluorescent lettering.

Down to the reports all of them reading like oriental riddles. Occasional saunters around the thirty foot square lab jammed to the ceiling with equipment. Microscope specimen slides, a three foot thick cross section of lily flesh, and alien cell cultures thriving in ammoniac solution, all to be studied. A puzzle furrow forming now between your close set eyes.

What have we here?

No iron?

Ridiculously high quantities of cobalt, of vanadium, of molybdenum, and all swimming around in gallons of propionic acid.

Throughout each of the lily's three leaves is spread a fine fibrous network. A nervous system? Who knows? Analysis shows weird carbon—carbon chains with fluorine in the side chains and reddish crystals of *m*-aminobenzoic

acid. Plenty of electricity too: the output of a small power station. It must be a nervous system.

"A nervous system," excitedly smacking right fist into left palm.

She looks up at you, all emerald eyes.

"I beg your pardon?" irritated.

"The network, couldn't it be some sort of nervous system?"

"I did think of that, Jalovec." Bored already and turning back to the electron microscope.

"But did you test it out? Electric and chemical stimuli, noting any slight variations in current? Did you find out if there is any reaction to changes in light and temperature? Did you see if you could find any parallel between the nervous systems of other creatures and the network in the lily? Did you search for possible nerve centres? Did you . . ."

"Yes, Jalovec." Absorbed in her work.

"Oh." Quietly.

Deflated you pick up the reports and try to read. Stop your eyes rolling away from the pages. Stop peeking at her legs. Stop your concentration from slacking. Your thoughts worm around to how soft she must be, how warm, smooth and sweet is her skin under that virginal white lab coat. What luxurious revels you and she could have, listening to her whispering in your midnight ear, "I'm a woman. Be cruel to me . . ."

—Control yourself!

Or finish up like pitiful Prescott,

Ogling her

Through a retort

Steamed up from his open mouthed

Breathing.

The door flies open letting the wind lift the papers from your knee and flick them under a bench and beyond. You are scrambling in pursuit of them when someone comes in, walks across to Fenella Daily, and begins talking to her in a deep rusty voice which would be a boon to any rag and bone man.

When the door is eventually pushed closed by Prescott you manage to recover all the wandering sheafs somewhat crumpled and soiled. Standing up with them heaped

in your arms you are faced with six foot six of greasy industrial clothing impressively filled with muscle, hair, and handsome features.

Straighten up to your full five foot one.

Look him straight in the eye.

"What's this?" asks the voice rumbling up from his knees if not somewhere even lower.

"This, Mr. Beattie, is my new assistant, Jalovec."

"Another runt like Goodwin, only he had more on top."

From Beattie's vantage point your balding spot is obviously visible.

"You really have a kinky taste in assistants, Fenella sugar."

Prescott chokes slightly.

"Kindly address Dr. Daily by her proper title Beattie. Your forwardness is becoming objectionable."

"Screw yourself old fellow. Just give Amherst my message when you see him like a good chap now. 'Evening gentlemen."

Another blast of sea air, the door slams and he has gone. Prescott stands looking after him, enraged, quivering like a badly struck arrow.

"Excuse me Dr. Prescott, what message was that?"

"Huh? Oh something about the r/t being on the blink."

"R/t?"

"Radio telephone, idiot!" Fenella is snappy. Beattie apparently upsets her. Probably the only male who could have her anytime, and they both know it.

"Then we have no communication with the mainland at all now?"

"None, apart from the transistor set in the saloon, and it's always tuned to Radio Scotland."

A fresh thought drops into your head, as delightful as a newly laid egg.

"Sir Martin's report can't go out then."

"Remarkable observation, Jalovec. You may soon be as brilliant as bright Ernest here." Smiling maliciously she takes off the lab coat to display sleek grey skirt and white sweater. Prescott's optics seem to pop like a couple of flash bulbs. He grins weakly as she combs her hair, moving her arms and neck sinuously.

"Well, Fenella, the old man's going to be in one terribly filthy mood when he finds out. I suggest that we all retire to our quarters as quickly as possible, and try to steer clear of his path tomorrow."

"The essence of courage, aren't you my darling? Why look at the marvellous way that you faced up to big bad Beattie, heroic." She stands before him, runs her hands slowly across his shoulders and speaks gently. "Now you're not really afraid of Sir Martin are you? You're not really afraid of him putting a mark against your name so black that you'd never get another job, even as a lav attendant, hmmm?"

Laughing softly she moves her body against him, arms around his neck . . .

—HE'S DROOLING . . .

The door opens again and is hastily closed. Standing there, rainbeads on cheeks, and outrage glowing crimson from his ears, Sir Martin Amherst.

"Out of order. Out of bloody order!

"Lies, lies, lies; great greasy slug of a liar tells me that the radio equipment's on the bum. Wet nosed cretin of a radio operator. Oh I could hear it all right, cackling away in there like a mentally deficient old hag, but would they let me near it? Not on your life. Damn all up with the thing and well I know it. 'The drift of the lily will damage the rig within the next three days' if you please. The only drift that's going to do any damage around here'll be the drift of my boot into Beattie's backside as soon as I set eyes on him."

He glances at you.

"And you, Javelin, or whatever you're called, I've written out a report on your disgraceful appearance this morning. There's another thing that the Minister is going to hear about. It had better not happen again."

"No sir."

"And you Prescott. I imagine this has been another of your incredibly fruitful days, unlocking the enigmas of the unknown by the hundredweight no doubt, shedding light in the biological darkness, striking an order in Chaos? Well, speak up man."

A twitching smile on the victim's lips.

"Well, ha ha, you see, Sir Martin . . ."

"Oh yes I see. I see a damn sight better than you imagine. Stupidity, incompetence, and sloth. I picked you for my team on the strength of your work on *Idiacanthus Fasciola*. For a while I couldn't understand how such a magnificent thesis could come from such a barren intellect, but a couple of days ago when I was in London there was a rumour in circulation that the thesis was principally the work of that young undergraduate Briggs who died of leukemia out there in Mexico with your party.

"As soon as that r/t is operational I'm going to request an investigation into that rumour. There's something for you to sleep on Prescott.

"Goodnight Fenella my dear."

"Goodnight Uncle Martin."

—Uncle Martin!

The door bangs shut.

Prescott swings round and pulls you by the lapels to within inches of his bared brown teeth. He yells.

"Me. Why is it me he picks on?"

"It should be you; you with your ridiculous wog name. You, the snivelling stunted misfit, without breeding or even a proper education.

"And me; me with a public school, Oxford, first class honours, and doctorate. Do you hear that?"

"DOCTORATE."

His punch bounces you backwards off of a steel cabinet and onto the floor. His voice softens to a cracked whisper.

"No sense of proportion, none."

Fenella is back against the Stereoscan, her eyes alive with alarm and excitement. She laughs.

"Tut tut, Ernest don't upset yourself over the old horse. He's just angry with Beattie and looking for somebody to take it out on. That's all. Anyway he's drunk."

As you come to your feet Prescott hands you your coat with a mumbled apology. Dabbing at your bleeding lip with a slightly used handkerchief you push the daily reports into your brief case and step outside. Walk across the rig through the bustling busy dark, and then climb down the ladder into light and warmth. Strip your mac off, shake it roughly and start folding it up. Lucky for that big swine that you didn't use the fatal karate chop to

the neck which you read about in that article on self defence in 'Man'. Huh. If he only knew how close he came. Water flowing into eyes. Lump rising in the throat. Self pity.

—Fight it.

What is keeping those two anyway? They should have come to the hatch by now. Wait another minute staring up the ladder at the square of black night. She was directly behind you. What are they doing up there? Grasping the handrails, placing your foot on the bottom rung you decide to climb up and peep over the edge. Then suddenly she is above you and descends straight into your arms. There is teasing delicate perfume from her hair and you find yourself nuzzling the nape of her neck, your arms encircling her waist.

She stiffens.

"Don't even think about it, Jalovec. Only Snow White goes in for dwarfs."

You step back and she turns to face you, her eyes the deep green of arctic seas.

Prescott descends with heavy clumps, his lips still trembling from the Amherst fusillade, and stands clasping and unclasping his hands in anguish. Emotional development obviously arrested at the age of twelve. She links arms with him and mutters to you in a monotone.

"I trust you can find your own way back to your quarters."

"Oh yes, er, thanks for showing me the reports and everything . . ."

But already she is walking away with him, talking in a light mocking voice.

"You're frightened again Ernest? You'll need a spot of the Amherst brandy to help you sleep tonight."

With ten minutes past you finally come to your cabin, enter, unpack the pin-up magazines, sprcad them out on your bed, and kneel. Commence weaving of fantasies, cruel fantasies tonight around the provocative positions of those glossy bodies, around bloated Amherst, leprous Prescott, and around her, especially around her.

But this is not escape enough. The twin pains of bruised lip and broken ego demand more. You lean over to your duffle bag and take out a compact leather case which

unclips to reveal a small portable tape recorder complete with a spool ready for playback. You place the listening device in your ear and switch on. There is the naked hiss of unspoiled tape for a few seconds, followed by the rumpling sound of microphone being lifted. Then the female voice deep and vibrant.

"Darling, oh darling you're wonderful. There could never be anyone quite like you." An actress, expensive but worth the money. *"There are such depths in you."* Marvellous expression she has. *"You are so tender, my love, so different from the rest of men. They are all so coarse and insensitive compared with you."* True, true, even if you did write the words yourself. *"You are the, the only man who really understands everything about women. You can make us do anything."* And still studying the photographs of tempting looks, impassioned mouths. *"I need you, crave for you. Oh God do with me what you will . . ."*

Bang. Bang. Bang.

On the door.

"Open up. He's done it. The Minister's done it."

Emergency dumping of mags and tape recorder under the bunk. Jumping up you unlock the door.

Enter the villain giggling wildly. Prescott.

"He's done it Jalovec. Just heard it on the eleven o'clock news bulletin. The risk to the rig is too great, he says. So 'D' class destroyer *Deterrence* will arrive tomorrow at fifteen hundred hours to dispatch the hazard."

He drops to the bed bawling lungfuls of laughter.

"And Amherst, you should have seen him . . . going off like a roman candle . . . face like peeled beetroot . . . screaming at those greasy roughnecks in the saloon."

Down on his knees now convulsing.

"He kept talking about . . . about 'prizeworthy research' . . . that's what he was out here after . . . a big plump Nobel . . . and it's out the window now. . . . Funny, Jalovec. . . . Funny. . . ."

Hysterics on the floor.

Kick him out.

Go to bed.

The black fluids of sleep.

You are drowning in them, gasping, choking, thrashing wild arms blindly.

Until you break the surface and lie there wet with sweat, bed blankets knotted at your feet.

A brutal headache is throbbing with the rhythm of your pulse beats, and you are shaking like a bad case of *delirium tremens*.

Glance at your watch.

Five o'clock.

Aye, what a collection of gruesome old nightmares that was. Probably just because you are sleeping in a strange bed. Have a walk around for a bit. That should freshen you up a shade. And a cold shower followed by a jaunt to the saloon for a cup of strong tea wouldn't be a bad idea either.

The freezing jet of water explodes across your face and chest as you vigorously rub hard fingers into your scalp. Nothing to touch a wet massage as a cure for headaches. Step shivering from the cubicle and pick up a towel for a brisk rub down.

The saloon is surprisingly crowded. Of course, the 'graveyard shift' will be coming off at six o'clock and the other crew will be going on for the next twelve hours. There are about twenty of them sitting at the tables. The white protective helmets lying beside food piled plates and coloured plastic mugs. Long blue threads of cigarette smoke coil up from overflowing ashtrays. Something is wrong.

The silence.

No one speaks.

Only the nagging rasp of a smoker's morning cough from the back of the room. Faces of clay with lifeless red-rimmed eyes, expressionless and unseeing. Riggers, wire-men, tool-pushers, all eating slowly thoughtlessly, not even looking at the meal before them.

—They can't all be

Hungover.

Amherst's

Is the only booze

On board.

Big frown as you catch sight of Prescott's back where he is sitting over beside the still record player—with Beattie

and Amherst. What are they doing in here at this time of the morning? Anyway you can always walk across to them and ask them what everybody is so depressed about today.

Smile heartily.

"Er, good morning, gentlemen, er. . . ."

No response.

Beattie's nose is running but he does not seem to be aware of it, or of anything else.

You move back trembling slightly, worry and wonder breaking out in your mind. Tiny fears trickle down your back.

—Now don't panic.

Do something

Constructive.

Yes, switch on the radio, but what station is broadcasting at half five. Too early? Try the 'Light' anyway.

"... who was a defeated candidate in the French general elections of last December has died at the age of sixty-three in his villa outside Nice."

That's it, the news.

"The mysterious marine growth which appeared quite suddenly around the oil rig 'Sea Horse' a few months ago is to be destroyed this afternoon as the pull of the ocean currents on the growth is endangering the rig. A Royal Navy destroyer will take off the entire crew of 'Sea Horse' and then dispatch the hazard using flame-throwing equipment."

A guttural growling reverberates through the room, and you turn to see all eyes become bright and vicious staring at the radio.

Amherst and Prescott jump to their feet, spilling sugar, tea, and salt cellar to the floor. Sir Martin wrenches the transistor set from your grasp and places it on a table while Prescott goes behind the counter and opens a small cupboard from which he lifts an old cleaning rag reeking of methylated spirits. He drapes this over the radio.

Sir Martin reaches out with his cigarette lighter.

The two men seated at the table gaze blankly ahead.

"... and now it's time for breakfast special. . . ."

Click.

Phoomff.

Very spectacular the way that those flames belch up ceiling high. Dramatic. Impressive.

—What in
Hell is
Going
On?

The transistor collapses showering molten plastic and burning cloth across one of the roughnecks wearing only his mucky leather jacket over well slept pyjamas. He begins to scream.

You push Prescott aside, grab the fellow from behind and drag him away from fire. Drop him to the floor and douse his clothes with the contents of a quart bottle of milk.

Your cardigan sleeve has caught light. Rip the thing off and start beating it into the blaze. Kick the other roughneck away from the table, sending him sprawling against the door. Over there, above the cooker in the galley, a fire extinguisher.

Pull it from the wall.

How does the damn thing work?

Pull the pin and lift the funnel.

A thick foam fountain hits the burning mess and sprays out across the room, leaving the air heavy with smoke and fumes.

The fire is dead.

Coughing and retching, water streaming out of your eyes, you try to shout at them, but only a hoarse screech comes out.

"What's the game then, eh? What's the game? You could have killed us all. Bloody idiots. What are you all sitting there for like stuffed prunes, or something? Don't just gawk at me. For Christ's sake. . . ."

"Prescott, Sir Martin, speak. . . ."

"Have you all slipped your gears, or something?"

"What's wrong?"

"Am I dreaming? Is this a nightmare or something? Just another nightmare. . . ."

Stagger outside to where the noise of machinery and reality can be heard more clearly.

Machinery!

Then someone must be working. Someone must be sane somewhere.

You are running. Along corridors, through hatches, down ladders, across passages to the bottom of the rig, to the base of the derrick.

To the work box.

They are lifting the drill string, two miles or so of it, to replace the worn away bit. Men, grimy figures with safety hats and overalls and boots. But all moving with the dull efficiency of robotoids, all with the same dead countenances, all estranged from their actions.

Working with a fierce zeal they uncouple each thirty foot section of pipe as it comes up hot wreathed in steam, hose it down, grease the threads, and stack it. Rivulets of perspiration course down the temples into the ears and then drip onto the necks and shirts.

Mindless automatons.

You walk away.

Back to your cabin. That is the only escape. Go to sleep and reawaken. Yes, reawaken where the world has found its reason.

In your cabin you break open the large hamper of selected health foods which you brought from the mainland to ensure that you did not suffer from any dietary deficiency. Opening a can of blended vegetable juices you swallow it all in one draught.

Now just climb on top of the dishevelled bunk and lie down. Peace, sweet peace. Calm and then . . .

Asleep.

The small alarm clock has just stopped ringing on the floor. Grunt and stick your head over the side to look at the time. Twenty to ten. Another interview with Sir Martin today at ten. Ah well better get up. Funny dream that was last night about the fire in the saloon and the rest of it. Funny.

Just a moment. You are lying in bed fully clothed and there is an empty can of vegetable juice on the floor.

Steady now, steady. Probably just couldn't sleep and went for a short stroll, worked up a thirst and had something to drink on returning. After all, it is sheer foolishness to even consider that such a weird fantasy could actually have taken place. After all.

But what if it did. . . ?

A loud lusty voice sings raucously past your door *en route* to the saloon, crushing the budding fears. Of course it was just another nightmare. Everyone turned into zombies, an interesting twist of the imagination, probably with some amusing Freudian significance.

Sounds of gaiety as you walk towards Amherst's office. Laughs, whistles, and shouts from the dormitory and wash-room. While you think of what sweet words and tender phrases await your arrival at his door.

"Come in Jalovec. Come in my boy."

Wide grin on him this morning. Maybe the Minister has decided not to destroy the sea lily after all. Stuck out here for months in that case ; nauseating thought.

"Take a seat my lad. That's better now. Well I want you to know that I'm scrapping that silly report I was going to send in on your unfortunate appearance yesterday. Instead it will be replaced with my description of your bravery and split second speed in saving us when the radio went up in the saloon this morning. Damn good show."

It happened. It really happened then.

"Fine performance you know. The true spirit of St. George that you find in every thoroughbred Englishman."

"Actually, sir, my parents are Czechs."

"Well a drop of wog blood makes you cosmopolitan."

"About that incident in the saloon, Sir Martin. . . ."

"Selfless courage pure and simple. You're not even one of us and yet you risked life and limb in that fire. Highly commendable. Now if you'll run along I'll finish writing my little piece on Prescott. Disgusting the things that they are saying about that poor chap you know. Disgusting. But my report on him will soon put paid to all those smutty lies, you'll see. He's a fine upstanding fellow Prescott. Fine fellow."

Backing slowly away from him, with your eyebrows raised, bemused.

"Oh yes, and Jalovec if you see Beattie tell him not to worry. If he doesn't want to send the message to States-Lever about saving the sea lily I quite understand. I know that it would probably weaken his position as a rig boss with the company. So I'll send the call out to the Ministry as soon as the r/t is functioning again."

"Uh-Beattie and his men want to *save* the lily now?"

"Naturally."

"Oh! er, of course Sir Martin. Good morning."

"'Morning."

There is a foul smell about this whole carry on and it is not from your bad breath. You close the door behind you and make your way to the lab shack. Turn the handle. Locked. Give the customary few knocks and a couple of shouts.

"Anyone in? Dr. Daily? Prescott?"

Start kicking, but not too hard. Shoeleather is expensive these days. No luck. Shrug and walk off. Where is everybody and what is happening around here? Is Amherst schizophrenic? It's probable enough.

The day shift are carrying on with the job of pulling up the drill pipe, but with more vigour and expression than the other crew. No clockwork motions here but smooth action and perfect teamwork. One of the tool-pushers glances up at you and casually waves a gloved hand before returning to the work in hand.

An amorphous discomfort hangs about you. Why did he do that? Nobody ever waved at you before. Puzzled you wander off to the saloon hoping to find some company. But it is empty.

The charred table has been broken up and the remains stacked neatly behind the counter.

Laughter, and songs.

It is coming from outside. You step out onto the catwalk and freeze in disbelief. There is no liquor permitted on the rig for crew consumption, but before you are about two dozen men swaying around obviously falling-down-drunk and singing the praises of 'Plymouth Nell', 'The house of seven doors,' together with other off-key ditties. Leaning against the wall, and each other, for support are Prescott and Beattie.

—Perhaps all this
is merely but
Another
Dream.

First Amherst gone amicable, now Prescott and Beattie. Top with a rich layer of drunken roustabouts who have

not been near the hard stuff for days, and what do you have?

Nutcake.

"Hey there, Jalovec."

Prescott bounds over and grasps you by the hand.

Beattie is shouting to the men.

"Here he is lads."

And up go their cheers, sincere, loud and good humoured.

Then you are in their fumbling tugging grasp, pulling you disconcertingly nearer the siderail. A tall derrick-hand with garish ginger beard and commanding eyes catches you by the shoulder. He shouts.

"Get an eyeful of that down there me old son and tell us what you think of it. That's our lily."

That down there.

With the intricate extravagance of a frost fantasia on a winter window, crystalline colours aglitter under the chill bright sun, and fluctuating like wind waves on wheatfields, the sea lily.

Lying down there. Arrogant in its coarse splendour.

That down there.

Nibbling at your lower lip you push your way over to the door and leave them.

No longer perplexed.

But frightened.

Again.

To bed. The only place to be at such times as this. Pass the radio room where the quartz-faced youth is bending over the spark popping equipment. Tears of fat frustration as he mutters to himself.

"Won't go. Dammit.

"Won't go."

Scuttle away down the corridors. Until you hurriedly go past a figure in pink and halt two yards further on. Turn slowly around. She stands in front of the generator room door. Flamingo slacks and blouse. Very becoming. But the face. . . .

Smiling.

"Hello."

"Dr. Daily I . . ."

"Fenella. Call me Fenella."

"Well, er, Fenella. . . ."

She springs over to you, puts slender hands behind your head, draws it to her. And rubs noses.

"I like the way you say my name. Say it again."

—Proverbial last straw.

Swallow very hard.

Jump back.

Run.

'Fear of the unknown.' An expression which you have used often in mocking the ignorant. Here you sit scared sick, making a midday snack of your finger-nails. Try a little self analysis. First of all, do you feel ill? Yes. Hmm, and you feel apprehensive about the state of things? Very definitely. Well then which change upsets you the more, the personality transformations in the people around you, or, the alteration of the sea lily from scummy green to startling gaudiness? The people upset me—they despised me yesterday—ignored me and everything else this morning—and now they all seem to *like* me. It's positively unnatural. Nobody ever takes to me. Perhaps whatever changed the sea lily changed everyone's personalities as well. Aha, there's a thought. . . .

An insane extrovert sprays the lily with some new type of luminescent paints and then runs around dropping soluble hypnotic drug tablets in the tea, coffee, soup, etc., but none of these entered your body as you have your own food supply, three months of it, together with tinned milk and other highly nutrient beverages. Prescott's behind it all. A spy from some oil company which wants the secrets of States-Lever's sea drilling techniques.

Nok. Nok.

Someone at the door.

Prescott come to finish you off?

Remember lethal karate blow to neck. O.K. . . .

"Whooss, herrromf. . . . **WHO IS THERE?**"

Be calm. Confidence is the key.

Nok. Nok. Nokkety nok.

"Can I come in Jalovec?"

Fenella's voice.

"All right. The door isn't locked."

She steps in still smiling."

"What are you doing in here, darling, all alone? Come out and look at the lily with me." Softly.

"Thank you, but I am feeling a fraction off key today and I'd much rather go to my bed at the moment."

"Lovely."

She is unbuttoning her blouse.

"Uuuh?"

"I'll come in beside you and make you all warm and snug," as the blouse drops and she reaches for the zipper on her slacks.

". . . what? . . .

And your heart goes bouncy bouncy bouncy against your rib cage.

"NO," with a twitching shake of your head. "No n-no. Out out. OUT."

Pushing her, blouse, and hurt expression into the corridor.

"But Jalovec. . . ."

Slam the door. Double lock. Haul the desk over against it. Mustn't panic now lad. Keep a grip on yourself. Into bed. Into bed. Off with shoes, socks, and everything down to your woollen undies. Pull back the sheets and dive in. Move about until it is warm. Curl up into a ball. Bury your face in the pillow. Imagine you are about four years old again. Life is good. Life is simple. Dad gives you sixpence for running down with his line to the bookie's. Mum gives you a slap across the bum for starting a fire in a dust bin when her washing is out to dry. Those were the days.

"Jalovec," through the keyhole.

"Go 'way."

"Jalovec it's me."

"Who's 'me'?"

"Brian. Brian Beattie."

"What do you want Beattie. I'm ill."

"I thought that maybe you'd like to swop cabins with me. You must have nothing but the best from now on you know."

Sounds appetising.

Out of bed. move the barricade, open the door and poke your head round.

"Seems a very reasonable proposition to me Brian."

"Good. I've brought along a couple of roughnecks to move your gear along."

"Just a minute then."

Reach under the bunk for pin-ups and tape recorder. Toss them into the duffle.

"O.K., come in now."

Enter three colossal grotesques grinning obsequiously. Beattie shoulders your enormous food hamper. The other two lift the suit cases and duffle bag then follow their boss out along the corridor. Carrying your bundle of clothes and at the same time in the act of pulling on your trousers, you hop along behind them.

—Ready

To burst.

Into songs.

Beattie's apartment is comparatively palatial, furnished with large double bed, plush settee with plush armchairs to match, electric 'coal' effect fire. And Amherst's is not the only booze aboard after all. Beside that elegant bed, an elegant table stacked with drink.

Step inside. Even a carpet on the floor.

The men leave your bags down beside the wardrobe and Beattie comes over to you, claps you on the back.

"That was a brave thing you done lad," his earthquake of a voice grinding with emotion, "and don't think that'll be forgotten in a hurry. It won't."

They walk out.

Great fuss they are making over that fire. Odd. But might as well play along with the 'hero' tag while it still sticks to you. Leap onto the new bed. The sumptuous mattress almost swallows you alive. Who would ever have thought Beattie to be so sensual? Ah, at the foot of the bed, hanging on the wall, a life-sized painting of a beautiful blonde girl, reclining, sultry, nude. Mmmm.

Oh yes, yes, very homelike indeed.

Drrring, drrring.

"Who, uh?"

On the table. Hidden by a battery of bottles.

A telephone.

"Hello, er, Jalovec speaking."

"You must help us." Sir Martin's voice. "We didn't manage to repair the r/t and they've arrived."

"Wha . . . ?"

"The Navy, Jalovec they've arrived. You know, the destroyer that's supposed to kill the lily."

"Oh yes?"

"You'll have to come and speak to them. I . . . I can't face them Jalovec. They're sending someone across just now. Could you come and speak to him?"

"Well if you think that I can help. . . ."

"I'm sure you could persuade him to leave it alone Jalovec. The men will be in the saloon waiting to hear how you fare. I'll meet you on the lower catwalk in five minutes then."

"All right. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

On with your best grey terylene tie. Plaster down your thinning hair against the head, using rose-water from a cabinet in the toilet. Beattie is full of little surprises. Scrutinise yourself in the mirror and try knitting your brows. Very officious. Pity your eyes are so close set.

Outside the winds have abated and Amherst, Prescott, and Beattie await. Way down on the sea a small power boat from the grey sleek mass of the fighting ship. It draws alongside the far fringe of the lily and discharges a figure. A man, walking towards you, staggering occasionally across the vivid whorls of peregrine flesh.

Up he climbs, the fifty foot of ladder to the top where exhaustion lies ruddy on his face.

"How do you do gentlemen. I am Captain Loewe," puffing.

A bunch of how-do-you-do's in reply.

He smiles. Real dazzlers those teeth. And all together very distinguished. Greying hair even. He is actually Beattie's peer in height. Wow!

"I'd like to discuss the evacuation of the rig with you. Like to get it moving as soon as you can manage. Must be ready for the big show at three o'clock you know. There'll be a good deal of news coverage you realise; couple of small ships and some aircraft I believe. Must be ready."

"You'd had better speak to Mr. Javolec about that. He's in charge here now." Amherst's voice is cracked.

"Who?" The captain gapes confusedly after the retreating trio.

"Me, captain."

—Breathe in.

Look imposing.

"I'm afraid my instructions specify that I speak with Mr. Beattie and Sir Martin Amherst. They don't mention anyone called Jarevec. . . ."

He is trying to dominate you. Use desperate methods.

"Now hear this sailor. I'm the cheese around this village, like grampa says, so if you want to gas off do it now, if not you can start swimming back to your little tin boat, and go on playing admirals," all in the best Mickey Spillane phraseology.

"Eh?"

"See kiddo. Like us guys have just arrived at something big on the science scene with the funny flower down there but we've been in a fix over it since our noodlehead radio operator blew the ass out of the r/t. So all I want from you is a jaw with the big boys at the Ministry, over your yak box. Then you can go on home. You won't be needed. Clear?"

"I would like to know exactly by what authority you. . . ."

"Do your ears need cleaning, punk? I got real strong pals sitting on plenty power which they'll swing when I whistle, so don't pull the bull on me, or you'll find you've gotten it pushed up your tail."

Frightfully eloquent, what?

"This is somewhat unorthodox, but I can accommodate you as far as the radio goes. However if I am advised to complete my mission I shall proceed to destroy the growth whether or not evacuation . . . has . . . AAH."

He folds up and flops down. Flecks of froth from the mouth, groaning.

Dear damn I swear I never touched him.

Fetus position now, eyeballs rolling up.

Don't flee. A drop of courage, just this once, for only a moment. Please.

Kneel beside him. *Kneel!* That's better. Now, unbutton his jacket, and loosen his tie, and open his collar.

The groans diminish gradually until he is lying still, looking through the rails at the lily.

"I won't," hoarse and panting.

"Beg your pardon, sir?"

"Won't harm a tissue of it, Jalovec. I won't take the ship near it. Honest." Standing up now but a trifle unsteady.

"That's really very decent of you, captain."

What is wrong with his eyes? They look as if they have been pickled.

"Listen to it. Makes me feel so good to listen to all that happiness."

Listen to what? Is he mirawkulous? An ebriose captain on your hands?

"Feeling odd?"

"Feeling marvellous, and I'll tell you if you were in the Royal Navy I'd personally have seen to it that you received a commendation for your action in the saloon this morning. At least a commendation."

"Oh? . . . Hey, how did you find out about that?"

Big smile, quite sober now.

"Can't you guess?"

Bewildered by the entire episode you shake your head.

Still smiling he tidies up his appearance. Then with complete aplomb swings onto the ladder and descends from view.

Stupefied you walk into the saloon to be greeted by cheering, roistering, and general frivolities. Amherst standing on the counter, a mug of cocoa in his fist, the frown of worry tossed away like so many old paper handkerchiefs.

"For he's a jolly good fellow, etc.," bursting out at the sight of you.

Shouts about 'Jalovec the Lily-Saviour'.

But you have not had time to tell them. How did they find out? It's not as if they are mind readers or psychic or . . . What if they are?

Psychic.

Telepaths maybe, eh?

Nazaww ridiculous. Why all they have in common with one another is the fact that they work here on 'Sea Horse'. There are Geordie wiremen, Irish and Scottish drill men, a

Texan geologist, a Welsh electrician among the assortment of nationalities and skills employed on the rig. Even a knight. Absolutely nothing in common.

Except the lily. The sea lily.

That is it. The unknown potential amongst the known. The incalculable factor. Now if it is telepathic events then take on a different aspect. Obviously it's not too smart. No measurable intelligence at all in fact. So this takeover of the minds around you is an instinctive reaction, like the chameleon changing its colour.

Lily did that as well coming to think of it.

Some kind of survival mechanism.

Telepathic, then it can pick up hostile thoughts, and when they are strong, threatening destruction, like last night, like the captain's, it averts its own annihilation by turning these thoughts to ones of love.

Don't think like that. It's scary.

All of these ebullient men actually in an induced love trance. Agents of the unknown, no less.

Dropping the fat ham sandwich just pushed into your hand by a grinning tool-pusher you scamper off like a well kicked cur.

During your flight from the saloon you change direction twice, firstly because in your panic you lose yourself and the second time because you remember that you no longer live in the midget bedroom but in the grand master suite. Approaching the great solid door with growing sensations of security. You're just going to stay in here until they send you back to dry land. To Hell with research. The whole place is crawling with head cases.

Step into the cabin.

No escape.

Prescott and Fenella are sitting on the settee. What are they doing here? Are they in the mind grip of the sea lily? Oh yes, from the way they've been acting they must be. Perhaps the lily has no longer any use for you. After all you seem to be the only person unaffected by its power. Are they here to finish you off?

Prescott speaks.

"Hello Jalovec. That was good work on Captain Loewe, old chap. Champion."

But now it is time for the big pay-off. Is that what you mean?

Your eyes widen, breathing becomes spasmodic, shivering, hot and cold bursts of sweating. Go to it bravely. A touch of the carefree panaches.

Say something, gay.

"...hello..."

"Hello darling." Oh that voice does disreputable things to your metabolism. Something starts sniggering down evilly deep in your dark insides.

"Do you two want me for anything in . . . particular?"

They nod.

Another blast of the shakes. Teeth achatter.

"It's about myself and Fenella, Jalovec." He stands up. "We were unofficially engaged. Honeymoon on my father's Jamaica estate. Tobacco plantations you know. Lovely view of the Blue Mountains too. Ah well, that's life.

"You see she has told me that it is you whom she loves. I must say however that I really cannot blame her. I can tell when I'm beaten. When one realises that one's rival is not only the best man for the girl, but also the very friend who saved one's life in an act of selfless courage, what can one do but shake on it and retire gracefully?"

He sticks out a nicotine browned hand.

A brief but hearty handshake and he walks out, a generous smile of self-sacrifice on his lips.

"That just leaves you and I," tingling words.

"'You and me' is actually the correct grammatical form, Fenella," and a snappy census of the room proves her statement to be correct.

"That is what I mean." Hair a sweeping cascade of flaring inferno. She moves over to where you are standing, in the far corner.

"The Navy. They're not going to . . . to . . ." your voice shooting up to a squeak.

"I know, Jalovec. I know." Her arms around your neck.

"How do you know? How can you possibly know, any of you?" in a croaky contralto.

"Can't you guess?" Laughing, she draws herself against you.

—YIPEEEEE It's Xmas.

It is only afterwards, with her rich red hair on the pillow,

that you decide to donate the large painting of the nude to the saloon, and, while the mood is on you, why not rig up the ego-inflating tape recorder in the dormitory? After all who wants the wrapper when you can have the loaf inside? And what swinging bread.

Lying there thinking about the lily and the fascinating reversal of polarities in your relations with society. People praising you, smiling, idolising and even sleeping with you. Love, funny stuff. They actually love you. All of them. You tremble, push your face down to the delicate warmth of her throat for comfort, for sanctuary; for you are a man too long disprized.

Now consider the sea lily.

It has tied everyone here together with some strong and undoubtedly emotional bonds. On the conscious level they all seem to separate individuals but what about the deeper levels of their minds? A communal subconscious perhaps? Yes there is a possibility. They are aware of what is happening in that case, but not completely, just enough for them to consent to it. Certainly you have not seen anyone fighting the influence.

Destruction of all aggression, or at least all anti-social aggression, and not just that which is hostile to the lily itself.

Very nice.

When you walked into the saloon this morning no one was completely readjusted. All minds in a mental vortex. The radio emitted hostility. They decided to give a dose of what their fuzzy brains believed was its own medicine.

They 'killed' the radio.

And almost included themselves in the deal at the same time. That accounts for the big gratitude for you stepping in, because if their survival instinct is one with the lily's then the saving of the two rough-necks from the fire had the same effect of saving everyone of them and the lily itself.

But that does not explain why the growth did a Cinderella in reverse last night, from a scum-covered mush to that fascinating optical beanfeast. Think on it. Remember how all the crew who were not working were hanging drunk over the catwalks admiring 'their beautiful

lily'. Well maybe that colouring has some hypnotic effect? Perhaps.

Or perhaps it is subtler than that; they are now emotionally bound up with the lily, it has become a part of their personalities, not a very attractive ingredient as a slimy greenish horror, but as an exotic blossom it gains their admiration. Yes, of course. It strengthens the tie through making the person admire it as a part of himself. Personal vanity. The old Narcissus weakness.

Oh, real sneaky, real dirty.

Fenella makes a small animalish sound and curls up to you. Snug as she would say.

The helicopters full of newsmen and cameras have returned long past to the mainland. But the three small craft which came out to cover the story of the lily's end are still with the destroyer. For about two hours this afternoon they lay waiting with the warship's guns trained on them while the telepathic net engulfed all the minds on board. Only one gentleman was similar to yourself in that he was immune, but your differences are more impressive than your semblances; he's in irons while you're in clover.

With H.M.S. *Deterrence* on the doorstep the world is temporarily rosy, but do not delude yourself. No matter what excuses Captain Loewe has been fobbing off on Admiralty, Ministry, and other sundry authorities he cannot hold them at bay indefinitely. They are going to jump into the play-pit soon enough to see just what everyone's about.

You start to dress and worry.

There is an entire nation a mere one hundred miles away wondering just what in Hell is the game out here. Buttoning your duffle coat and pulling the hood up around your head. Along the sleeping corridors. Grit your teeth and step out into the scything night air. Could the lily cope with, what is it, about fifty million odd minds? Doubtful.

What is that?

Up there.

Among the glow-fringed blocks of black cloud the red-green-green-red-green of aircraft. Then up pops the big cold moon. Four of them. Sound like Shackletons. Change in engine pitch as one of the planes breaks formation and comes in low across the path of white sparkled water. Yes

definitely Shackletons. The others are swinging down to follow him. Bizarre droning bugs they are. Louder, nearer, nearer. Hope they can see the rig because they're coming straight at you. Heh, heh.

Coming . . . straight . . . at . . . you.

The one in front is almost on you.

Unswerving. Blind twit.

He's going to . . .

"PULLUP PULLUP. NO NOOO. . . ."

Your yell is squandered in the Thunderblast of engines. The shape is gone, whipped overhead.

KRAAK!

A hard blue flare splutters up yonder. Below there is the shimmering lily. Rising from its surface in slow undulation are thousands of fine pastel coloured fronds, slender, graceful; leaning out to the west, out against the flow of stiff northern wind.

Out to where Britain sleeps, tonight.

A sudden silence.

Startled, you sit erect in your bed.

It has stopped. The drilling has stopped. For two months you have been living with the noise, always some kind of noise. Even when they are changing the bit you hear the winches dragging up the long drill stem piece by piece. The inescapable rumble rumble creeping in everywhere with neither respect for any man nor respect for any occasion. But particularly diabolical in the lavs: it seems to echo through the plumbing and then vibrate up right into your very bowels. Nobody on Sea Horse has constipation.

Bang. Bang.

You jump.

"Come in, please."

A laughing Brian Beattie pushes the door aside with a greasy protective glove.

"We've struck it. Natural gas."

"My God. Really?"

"And the pressure's terrific. We're just about to ignite it. Coming to see?"

"Oh boy, oh boy, I'm coming. Ha ha hee. Sling me jacket on."

Trotting eagerly behind the large man. Rapid happy voices abound, grinning faces, rowdy songs all round.

POOOOmm.

"YeeeeHaaaa." Screaming cries seem to permeate the universe. You cringe uncontrollably.

"That'll be the men lighting the jet now."

"Oh." Straighten up and climb the ladder.

Great long twisting banner of flame writhing in the breeze. An assortment of toots, hoots, whistles, siren yells and other nautical music issue from the fourteen Royal Navy vessels at anchor around the rig.

Everyone is waving. Everyone is cheering.

Everyone is going to be rotten drunk tonight.

Amherst is smiling his superior smile. He appears to have lost a few morsels of the common altruism. Could his subconscious be trying to opt out of the love-tie? Probably. Jealousy most likely. He sees that you have all the say, all the power, and underneath it all he can't take it. He is greedy. But it will take years for the subliminal envy to wear him away to his old beaurocratic self. Seeing you looking at him he comes over cups his hand to your ear, leans over and shouts.

"I see that you are not so easily impressed as these fellows, Jalovec. Look at Beattie over there, God bless him. He thinks this is November fifth. Or what about Prescott, from the way that he is gawking I'd say he's trying to work out how many refills for his gas lighter he'll get out of this lot."

Nod and walk away.

Fenella is shouting something indistinguishable. Grasps you by the hand and starts to dance around laughing tempestuously. Soon the idea catches hold and a long chain of human hulks some in overalls others in pyjamas are doing the hokey kokey round the derrick. But used to a recent life of luxurious indolence the pace soon becomes too strenuous for you. Legs throbbing angrily you totter delighted into your cabin, and sit gasping enthusiastically on the arm of a chair.

Uncap another bottle of whisky, and pour yourself one little nip. You tried to consume it in masculine mouthfuls up until your five-day stint of the quaking purgatories which you passed almost entirely in the lav. Now you drink

in moderation from a miniature crystal goblet so small that it would take over an hour to demolish at the rate of one glass per minute. Anyway you don't need it. If you need anything now it is Fenella.

Fecund Fenella Daily. The love-tie's most practical expression of its gratitude and love for you.

Your name is known to every person in the British Isles. The hero. Bringer of love. Jalovec.

Swallow the whisky.

Jalovec.

"I look in the mirror,

And what do I see?

The squat hairy goblin

That people call me."

"Don't keep repeating that silly rhyme."

Whirl about sending the goblet bouncing off of the deep pile carpet. Standing behind you at the record player she is turning the 'on' switch.

"You aren't like that at all. Maybe you are small but . . . well you're the cuddliest man I know. So there."

—A most singular compliment.

Out comes the music. 'Everybody loves a lover' Fenella's little joke. Almost the entire population of the British Isles are 'lovers' under the influence of the Lily. The very small number of exceptions. Estimated at about twelve hundred. They are mostly in hospitals undergoing hypnotic and drug treatments to break down their resistance. But there are a few who escape notice. The majority of these people are actually beneficial to the general condition. The balance of nature, or something to ensure that the healthy survive, or something. Because these free minds supply a more unbiased viewpoint on the 'amorous society' which cannot view itself objectively. The only danger lies in the hostile ones. Those immunes who hate the state of things which has ruined them either financially or socially, or both.

Like that joker who boarded a hoverbus for pilgrims coming out for a trip around the Lily. Once inside the ring of guarding warships he pulled his haversack on to his back climbed out onto the roof, and jammed the hatch with a long steel nail shoved into one of the hinges. Lying flat on his belly he quickly set up an anti-tank rifle piecemeal from

the bag. Rifle huh! The fellow blasted about fifteen craters in the flesh before the craft drew away far enough to be out of range. Then a rather distraught group of fellow passengers, who were mostly ladies, managed to open the hatch, and administered a spontaneous form of justice by lowering the screaming culprit slowly down the wide funnel into the hover-blades.

And that weapon was manufactured in the U.S. of A.

Sticky point is international relations. None of the British ambassadors abroad come under the love-tie. Each country has its own excuses for cutting links with the U.K. and Eire, but only a few specify the Lily. Most governments don't like to admit that the creature exists. However a handful of nations do have some considerable concern as regards the matter. Aerial photographs must certainly show the swollen seed pouches almost ready to burst open, and the idea of this does not help the sleep of government officials in those European states on the Atlantic seaboard. When all those cute little seeds go popping across the North Sea. . . .

Well look at Britain.

The party system of government has virtually collapsed with all sides putting forward motions and everyone supporting everyone else.

A horror of communalism. Anarchism even.

What a way to run the country.

And what a country.

Religion is raging like some plague of the conscience, even although all the Roman Catholics are in imminent danger of excommunication. The cries from the Vatican go completely unheard, or are disregarded, or are simply laughed at. After all how could so much love be 'the ultimate undermining force of the Devil and his legions'? Church unity has been overleaping all the old restraints. Everything in the evangelical garden is lovely.

Elsewhere in the country there have been more traumatic effects. Industrial relations have never been as good. Too good. The disappearance of almost all absenteeism, the boost in production figures, the cancelling of all strikes due to union demands being promptly met, competitive spirits virtually vanishing. The economy is doing pretty cart-

wheels. And collapsing. How could it be expected to survive?

The number of pregnancies both in and out of wedlock took a hysterical jump a couple of weeks ago.

Neither must one forget the desperate opening of thousands of clinics to contain the incredible spread of venereal diseases.

But then what about the Amazing Disappearing Crime-wave. No criminals.

Policemen out of work. And judges. And court officials. And prison personnel. And manufacturers of safes, burglar alarms, and all other security devices, hundreds of firms of locksmiths. And companies supplying security transportation for shipments of money or valuables. Security is right out of fashion.

No exports either since the rest of the world stopped trading with Britain. No one sails, flies, or even tries a cross channel to the U.K. There are aircraft belonging to British air companies in almost every international airport on the globe. The pilots and crew have simply broken contract, refused to return, and taken up flying these planes for other companies 'until such time as the situation in Great Britain is returned 'to normal'. Same goes for ships flying the Red Ensign. Right sickening isn't it? You'd expect some degree of loyalty from them. They'd just better keep out of gun range that's all.

The whole nation is only about a week away from social, political, and economic disintegration. And each one of Her Majesty's subjects not to mention the Irish are loving it.

Literally.

Not to worry.

The seed pouches will split tomorrow and then. . . . Well if the seeds grow as quickly as the Lily did, almost overnight, love will crush away all the nasty little hates and fears in millions of continental minds well within the week. Then things should brighten considerably. In the meantime nobody is starving.

But you are rather peckish.

Time for grub.

Off to the saloon with Fenella, hand in hand of course, to review today's menu.

Monday 19th December.

Cod, fried in vegetable oil, or boiled.

Raw carrots, tomatoes, fresh peas,
grated heart of lettuce.

Assorted cheeses.

Selection of nuts.

Whole wheat bread with butter.

Cocoa, hot chocolate, Bovril, Ovaltine, tea.

Tomorrow: Egg steaks.

NO SMOKING PLEASE.

Ah, delicious. What nutritional value. It was a wise decision to order nothing but health foods for the men, and how eagerly they have taken to them. No excess fat on their bodies these days. Why some of them are positively slim. Of course they spend one week in three back home and poison their systems with rubbishy meals. It is up to you to see that they are properly fed out here to compensate.

As you eat you hear the approaching rattle of a helicopter.

Funny.

The 'copter left at noon, just before you awoke. Perhaps it didn't arrive this morning and you were not informed. Funny.

Picking up a nine-inch-long carrot you bite a chunk out of it and rise from the table.

Fenella looks up from her plate.

"I'm just away out to see who our new arrivals are love."

She nods approvingly and returns to the task of stuffing her mouth with boiled cod, big white steamy lumps of it. She is definitely becoming slimmer as well. Except for that slight swelling of her abdomen. Maybe, well . . . a baby? Mmm that would be nice.

It is colder. A fierce wind is churning distant waves against the now vast kaleidoscopic Lily. Walk shivering towards the landing plate.

As you reach the ladder she steps down all browns and reds from the distorted plum shape of the setting sun.

"Mr. Jalovec." Statement not question.

"Who are you?"

Calm now lad she's only a woman.

"My name is Therese Spinks. How do you do?"

Shake the scented soft gloved hand.

"What did you say your name was?"

"Spinks, Therese, miss."

Ah well, we all have a cross to bear.

"Should I be expecting you for something or other Miss Spinks?"

"I can quite understand your bewilderment Mr. Jalovec. I've arrived far too early. You see I'm here to interview you for 'Madame.'"

"Oh, er, Madame who?"

"Ho, ho. I mean the magazine."

"'Madame'. I've never heard of it."

"But then you can hardly be expected to read popular female literature, Mr. Jalovec."

"Anyway I'm about two hours early. You shall probably be notified of my visit in about half an hour. We, that is my editor, applied for permission to have an interview with you and it was granted, but the only helicopter which we could find on charter could not fly us out tomorrow due to commitments, and Wednesday would be far too late.

"So here I am," defiantly.

"Pretty, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"They said that you wouldn't mind being interviewed. After all, you are a National Figure." She says it with capitals.

And you are.

"Come on down to my room then. We'll have a glass of something while we chat."

"Thank you. That would be very nice."

In the light of the flaring gas jet she looks Amazonian. Striding alongside you, black hair loose in the wind, dark eyes with sweet sumptuous centres.

You meet Prescott.

"Hello Ernest. This is Miss Spinks. She has come to interview me. This is Dr. Prescott, Miss Spinks."

"Very pleased to meet you Miss Spinks," eagerly. His cheek is twitching nervously. Obscene, this man's reaction

to women, any women. Really must see the doctor about him. It's becoming desperate.

"Will you be coming to the party in the saloon tonight? I'll tell you what, after you've finished with Jalovec come along to my cabin and I'll tell you about the fascinating research I'm doing on the Lily and then. . . ."

"Thank you, Mr. Prescott, but my magazine is 'Madame' not *Biometrical Journal*. Good evening," cutting him coldly down in mid-flight.

"Bu . . . but . . ."

And you are gone round a corner of the corridor into your room.

"Well, well I did not expect you to be living in such comfort."

"Oh it satisfies my meagre requirements."

Sitting down in an armchair she places her bulky leather shoulder bag at her feet and draws from it a cream-coloured notebook.

"Shall we begin now?" smiling up at you and crossing her long legs. From where you stand, by the booze table, you have just been given a most appetising view of her lower thighs. Just a few tasty inches but enough to start the mild wrecking operations on your inhibitions. This should happen with Fenella.

"Er, herrrum. Well, yes, what would you like to know to start off with?" Your mouth is drying.

Need a drink.

Do something to keep your mind off of those legs or you might do something regrettable.

"Where were you born?" still smiling. Couple of neat gold fillings in that mouth.

"Oh in Glasgow." Look straight into her eyes and fight it.

"Dennistoun Maternity Hospital, to be exact." You pour her a drink and bring it across.

"February second 1940," holding the glass out. She reaches for it, her hand closing over yours.

"It was a Thursday."

You lean closer to the promising perfumes.

Bash bash bash. That's your pulse.

"Two o'clock in . . . the . . . afternoon."

Kiss.

Your fingers fumble for the phone and finally find it.

"This er, this is J-Jalovec. Um see that I'm not disturbed for the next . . . herrum, next hour, or so."

Slam the receiver down.

Lift all one hundred and forty pounds of her, and gasping hoarsely stagger across the room.

Great tumble into the bed.

"Oh please be gentle with me Jalovec, please. Oh Jalovec. . . ."

And so . . . about thirty minutes later you are thinking. Nothing else your exhausted frame is capable of doing. Extraordinary how she has managed to keep that fabulous tan. All over. And at this time of year too without being able to so much as nip down to the Canaries some weekend for a quick bake on the beach.

Incredible.

WHAM!

The shock almost leaves you paralytic.

Into the room comes a ferocious Fenella.

"What in Hell's going on then?"

"UGgg ggug gg. . . ."

"Get her OUT."

"P-Please Fenella. You're shouting. The whole rig **can** hear you."

"I don't give a damn. OUT with her."

This is wrong. What about the love-tie?

Therese bounds from the bed, amazingly sprightly all things considered, and swings a cruel blow with the edge of her hand to Fenella's neck. The karate chop. Your red-haired Valkyrie crumples to the floor knocking over the bulky leather shoulderbag which thuds open. To reveal wiring, transistors, and other suspicious little electronic trinkets.

You walk across. Kneel beside the unconscious form of Fenella and stare in disbelief at the compact but powerful transmitter.

"Methinks Miss Spinks stinks," turning your head to look at her. She is sitting on the bed, legs crossed again, right arm resting on her knee, and in her hand some thing black pointing at your chest.

A gun.

"Sit still, or I will have the satisfaction of putting three bullets into your heart."

—Thick heavy dread
Like diesel oil
Pours into your
Guts.

"Oh no. No please don't do that. . . . Don't hurt me, please."

Another whining joins your own.

A sigh from her. Of relief?

There goes a high-pitched howl probably from one of the naval vessels. Then a distant explosion. And another one, nearer.

"Telephone," she points to the instrument, and then you realize that it has been ringing for almost a minute.

"Be careful what you say."

You lift the receiver.

"Hello."

"Jalovec?" Beattie's voice charged with panic. "We're being attacked by aircraft. You must help us. There's some sort of jamming signal throwing all of the naval tracking equipment. We're helpless. Even our air cover is being effected by it. What do we do Jalovec? What do we do? Help us. . . ."

You let it drop.

It swings from side to side, pathetically, a miniature voice pleading and sobbing from the earpiece.

Fenella grunts quietly on the floor.

More explosions, but still in the distance.

Suddenly the door flies open and Prescott is running over to you babbling and throwing his hands in the air.

"Been looking all over for you. Must take you and Miss Splinks to safety. There's a motor launch down . . ." running flat when he first takes in her nakedness and then her pistol.

She points it at him.

"On your knees Prescott, quickly."

But he doesn't.

Eyes wide he flings himself at her. Demented with lust and hate.

Bang, bang.

The two shots a couple of holes in the polished pine

wardrobe. Twisting bundle of various arms and legs among the bedclothes.

Grab a bottle.

Walk over to the human octopoid, reach in, grip her hair and start pulling her head forward. Forward and down.

Down with the bottle hard behind the left ear twice. Second time it smashes, scattering whisky and shards of glass over the sheets. Prescott loosens his tie gasping for breath, and turns her round to look at the face.

A small drop of blood falls from her nose to spot the pillow. Eyes cold, accusing, glazing. . . .

He looks at you, amazed.

"Dead. . . . Jalovec."

Boom boom boom.

BOOM.

BAAANG!

The violence of the explosion rocks you across the room. For a moment you cling to the edge of the door with the feeling that everything is passing you too fast and you cannot catch up. Then through the corridors, running, through the saloon, the passages, onto the lower catwalk. Walking quickly now, grasping the handrail.

The blaze of the sinking missile carrier illuminates the sleek shapes of the big French Mirage 111-0's diving in with an entourage of Swedish SAAB fighters, cannons flickering. Chewing up great wide furrows of pulpy froth across the sea lily.

The Lily. IT'S DYING.

Down the fifty feet of ladder to where the leaves are decaying swiftly, into a putrescent jelly. Nauseating smell makes your stomach buck. Two of the three seed pods are crackling popping bonfires. Coughing and retching you start out towards the undamaged one. Struggle through a knee-deep bog of stinking gluey fronds. Freezing cold tears bites into your legs. Rain lashing into your face, partially blinding you and soaking through your clothes. Fighters yell past lacing the night with burning streamers of white which explodes into an already crippled destroyer. Jump across this trench of green puss and *splash* deep into sea water. Thrashing around wildly, spitting, sneezing, climb to safety on the firm swell of the seed pod. Gulping brine,

mouth open, fluid pouring from your nostrils. Find something sharp to open the pod. Your numbed fingers claw into the jacket pockets to withdraw a sodden lump of grey linen handkerchief, one eraser, one cufflink, and a threepenny bit. To the south fighters are bunching for another attack. Climb higher up the wet slippery mound. A knife, must find a knife. Your hand rips half of your trouser pocket away as you withdraw a long thin object. A ball point pen. The jets are rushing towards you, hugging close to the sea. Leaning on your elbow you plunge the pen into the taut stretched skin and rend it apart. Gush of lemonish liquid spraying seeds like tiny starfish over your face. And you laugh. Deafening whoop as the fighters pass above.

Shells punch into the pod and it erupts kicking you back into the gooey trench, and unconsciousness.

It's cold.

It's January.

It's Friday the thirteenth.

And you've got creeping pneumonia. But better here among the snow-blanchd hills behind Campbeltown than in an English prison subjected to their mockery, ridicule, and sick scorn.

It is almost a month since you first felt their hate, anybody's hate, very painfully upon waking up in that trench with a group of roustabouts wading in at your ribs with their heavy boots. They would probably have killed you had not Beattie stopped them, and he in his turn would probably have killed you had not the sailors arrived to place you under arrest. Then you were dragged through a crowd of howling angry men.

Prescott pushed his way to the front screaming "Slime sucking pig's bastard of a murderer. She was going to be my fiancé and you ruined her. Ruined her," and spat a greaser right into your face. He ranted on until someone pulled the babbling fool aside.

You did not see Sir Martin Amherst but that is perhaps quite fortunate considering that he is now in an institution for the criminally insane. After the Lily's death he was summoned to appear before the Minister to explain his negligence and distortion of facts and deliberate tampering

with specimens and why he did not take action when the situation got 'out of hand'. The Minister had been putting the needle on Amherst for almost a year, so when the knight arrived he brought a meat cleaver in his brief case. But then quite a number of people reacted violently to recovery from Lilylove, others just had ordinary breakdowns. A total of over five millions for the mental hospitals.

—More nuts
Than in
Brazil.

The navy boys put you in a launch and then you were sailing away from the rig with voices crying to you, downwind from the rig.

"You'll pay for it. Just wait."

"We'll get you, Jalovec."

"Rot in Hell and damnation scumrat."

Polarity is once again reversed. But whereas you were merely despised before the Lily you are now loathed vehemently. Equal and opposite reactions.

From disdain, to love, to hatred.

You were landed at Grangemouth and handed over to the joyous arms of the police. Glad that trade was at last picking up. There was no point in putting you in prison. They were all empty and staffless so you were driven straight through the early morning to Glasgow.

There to await transfer to London for trial and eventual imprisonment if not execution.

And it was in the Police Headquarters at St. Andrew's Square, sitting in front of a single bar electric fire with a tall blond sergeant and two constables, that the news came over the small radio set beside the telephone.

"... Legal history was made today when Dr. Fenella Daily, one of the scientists at work on the sea lily during the crisis, was granted permission to have an operation for abortion carried out upon her. The father of the unborn child is known to be ..."

That was the heartbreaker.

There was a sudden hardening of the spiritual arteries. Came bitterness. And a warm healthy hatred all of your very own.

At a quarter to two the soldiers arrived. Seven men, big

slabs of granite for their chests, muscles galore, to escort you to the station and thence to England. Strangely enough there was no crowd awaiting you, crying for blood. Probably your presence had been kept secret from the citizens of this flourishing city to prevent any outbreaks of rioting during your four weeks stay in their midst. A wise decision. Only eleven days ago the annual Celtic-Rangers football feud to celebrate the New Year ended in a full-scale religious battle. Butchery. Carnage. Reaction to Lilylove.

—Celtic green and Rangers blue.

They painted

The town

Red.

You were taken in a covered jeep to the Central Station and told that you would be waiting in the vehicle for a half hour until it was time for the train to leave. Then you would be taken on board. After ten minutes the soldiers were becoming slightly restless. The captain in charge of them seemed to regard this as a symptom of nicotine starvation and sent two of his men out for cigarettes and a couple of bottles of export before the pubs closed.

—That left five.

Almost dreamily you bent down, picked up the machine pistol which one of them had left and fired a couple of short bursts.

—That left none.

Dazed you sat staring in disbelief at the slumped figures expecting them to jump up and pull the weapon away from your grasp. But they didn't. They just lay there, eyes open, with holes in their faces. Dropping the gun you vaulted out of the back of the jeep and sprinted down Gordon Street.

There is a remarkably straightforward method of setting your hands on some ready small change if you are financially defunct. You approach a shop front with a 'pennies for the blind' figure in the doorway, this is usually a 'blind boy' or a 'Sooty'. When passers-by see you struggling along the street with one of these they at first frown, and then realising that Student's Charities Day is only about a fortnight distant smile tolerantly. Two actually told you what a wonderful cause it was and dropped cash

in the box. Having trailed four of these up side streets and battered them apart with a section of exhaust pipe yanked from a double-parked Mark X Jag you found yourself in pocket to the strength of twenty-three and sevenpence.

Quarter past three and a small red and cream bus draws out of Killermont Street bus station. You were the third seat from the end on the port side. And you overheard the little chubby conductor mentioning to one of the other passengers that it had seldom snowed in Campbelltown since the last war.

—Well by

God it's

Certainly making up for it tonight.

The night, screeching blizzard that it is, stretches on, and you search vainly for shelter. There is a distillery somewhere around; now if only you could find that—haha.

The hour after hour of cold becoming more and more intense. Crawling like arctic ants eating through skin flesh and bone into the marrow. Then agony. Sitting on the frigid hillside with the bubbling and racking sobs of a four year old, legs stretched out before you. Rasping her name and punching through the drifting white at the marble earth.

Off with the shoes, and the socks. Rub the feet. Slap those toes, boy. Punch them. Smack them. But get them back in commission again. When they are all red and healthy it's up. It's tramp trampy once more.

This you suppose is a singular suicide. But it is a suicide. The police will not be long about catching you. It's a wonder that they didn't before you left the city. Ideally you should drown yourself. But the water down there in the sea must be near freezing. So hunt among your pockets for anything suitable for wrist slashing. If only you could find the distillery. Go for a swim in the whisky. Beautiful death! Mmm. What is this in the breast pocket?

Approximately the size of your thumbnail and like a small plastic starfish with three arms.

One seed.

The sky is hanging very pale, very ill up in the east. The fall turns raindrops which leave tiny punctures in the snow, turns rain which makes a steel coloured mess of the snow. Downpour. No snow.

Running over the fields, across the road, vault a dyke or two, beeline for the briny, your feet hitting the slush with the sounds of a messy eater slopping food. Right enough you're hungry though.

Across a pebble beach. To where the water licks against the rocks. Stand there for a moment on the shore gazing greedily at the sweet seed. And then you throw it. Watch it *splash* into a wave. Look. It's fizzing away like an indigestion tablet; and there are a few seconds of the old questions; what is . . .? from where . . .? *Who gives a damn anyway?*

—Each stood upon the sea lily
New freed from love's cocoon
And said he'd get you for it
But they spoke
Too bloody
Soon.

—CHRIS BOYCE

MARTIANS AT DICK'S END

by Daphne Castell

My grandfather was by way of being a blacksmith, the best for maybe fifty-mile round, until he understood, a good many years back, that horses had got to give way to cars and such. He didn't grumble none, he just went off quiet-like and attended some course, or something of that, with a lot of young chaps fit to be his sons, and he come back a better motor mechanic than any of 'em. He could tinker with anything wood or metal, and a lot of things that weren't; and he kept reading a heap of these shiny books with pictures, when he could get them; and he'd maybe nip into one of the big towns every now and then, and have a chat with chaps he knew that worked in garages and such.

What I'm going to tell you now came about all on account of he knew so much about this mechanical stuff, and it's as true as turnips. And the vicar and all the rest of them'll tell you the same, and you can't say fairer than that, can you now? Even if roundabout they say us Dick's Enders is a bigger lot of liars than Sodom and Gomorrah. Mostly jealousy, I reckon. They didn't have our advantages, other places.

It was one night in early spring, my grandfather was woken up by the old girl he calls his housekeeper. Makes a lot of talk in the village, that does, even if he is turned seventy.

She says in a queer sort of voice, "There's a feller waitin' to see you downstairs, Jack," and blow me if she don't keel over in a faint, curlers dropping out on the floor, and her feet turned up stiff in a pair of my grandfather's old grey socks.

He goes downstairs with an oil-lamp, and on the door-post he could see resting a hand what he didn't like the

look of. What he didn't like mostly was that it had a sort of white fur over it, and two thumbs. Leaving that aside, it was leaning, in a sort of casual way, about eight feet off the ground.

Still, he's a thick tall man, my grandfather, and a brave one—he wouldn't be a Dick's Ender else—so he took a deep breath, stepped outside, and looked up at a chap, say ten or eleven feet tall.

He called him a chap, for want of anything better, but he'd never seen a chap with white fur all over him, and a pair of great ears, like bat's wings, one on either side of his head. Not to mention he had a big barrel chest on him, like as if a balloon were underneath it. His face looked pretty much the same as anyone's, though, only bigger, and he had a thing like a gravy strainer clamped over his mouth and nose. He hadn't a stitch on, barring a kind of kilt, and my grandfather said it were a bitter chilly spring night. He said he was shivering himself like a jelly, and his teeth were chattering in his head, all on account of the cold.

"Martians!" he thinks, for he's a great reading man, like I said, shiny books, and newspapers and that; and he'd heard all about Things from another world and Unidentical Objects and Are Flying Saucers Watching Us?

This Martian bends down and says in a soft polite voice: "Well, listeners, I believe today we are to have the privilege of addressing Mr. Jack Beade, isn't that so, Jack?"

My grandfather was a bit took aback, but he just nodded, being a man without a lot to say for himself. The Martian heaved a great sigh. "A dreadful thing like mental illness commands all our sympathy," he said. "Nevertheless, backward people can sometimes be most helpful if given the right encouragement. One of them has given me information about you tonight."

After a bit of thought, my father made this out to be Soppy Sam, a local boy that's a bit wanting. Lucky for the Martians, really, because Soppy Sam wouldn't have noticed if they had purple skins and eight legs. Later on my grandfather learnt that the Martians picked up their English from listening to broadcasts, and TV interviews and plays, and that made their vocabularies rather limited. I reckon some of the words they learnt off the schoolkids later must have gone down a treat on Mars.

The Martian went on: "I wonder if you would care to tell us something about yourself, Mr. Beade? Am I right in thinking that you are something of an expert in the craft or technology of—ah—fixing things?"

My grandfather thought for a moment, and said, yes, he supposed you could say he was.

"Let me put you in the picture," offered the Martian. "A serious crisis has arisen, and though a local Government spokesman tells me that the damage is not absolutely irreparable, our personnel has unfortunately lost a number of its members who were authorised by their unions to deal with such matters. They have passed over, may their souls rest in peace. Ah," says the Martian, "what a falling-off was here! I knew them well, fellows of infinite jest."

My grandfather didn't rightly know what to make of this, except that somebody was dead, so he looked as if he'd taken off his hat, and murmured something under his breath.

"Can I persuade you, Mr. Beade, to fetch such tools as you may consider necessary, and accompany me? We shall be extremely grateful for your assistance. This thing is bigger than any of us!"

After a bit of arguing, my grandfather agreed to put his pants on, and he fetched along a few tools, and set off with the Martian, though he didn't like it above half, and nor did the old girl, who'd got up off the floor by this time, and was making herself a pot of tea.

It was getting on for dawn by now, not dark, and yet not quite light, with that cold pinky glow in one corner of the sky, where the sun was getting ready to bring in the tide and set all the boats tugging at their moorings. The duck were coming in low over the marshes, and a nasty mournful cheerless sort of noise they made, too, my grandfather said.

He sucked away at his empty pipe, and wished for his nice warm bed, and tried not to think too much about the ten-foot of white fur that was striding silently along beside him.

By and by, they come to a field that old Tedman generally kept his sheep in. The sheep was there all right, blowing out their breath in circles into the frosty air, and huddling together into a corner by the dyke; and something else was

there, too—a mortal great thing, bigger by a good sight than a coasting steamer, and shaped like a cartridge, flat at one end and pointed at the other.

There were several other Martians padding round about it, very quiet, like the great white cranes I saw once at a zoo, when my father took me on a foggy day—only taller, of course.

Grandfather's Martian sung out something pretty sharp in some funny language or other, and another Martian began to scramble up the ship thing, and disappeared into a hole amidst of it. By and by out come a sort of metal ladder.

"Come with us now," remarks the Martian, "as we make our way into the hold of the stranded vessel. We must be very careful, for who can tell what dangers we may encounter at every turn. Hold the light higher, Armandine, that our visitor may see the pictures on every wall—what an amazing relic of a bygone civilization now lies before us!" My grandfather takes this as an invitation to go up the ladder—he said after it was surprising how quick you began to catch on to what they wanted, with a chap ten-foot high looking impatient in front of you. So he started up the side of the ship, with the Martian just behind him, saying in a reassuring sort of way, "Lift out of order. Normal service will be resumed as soon as possible."

The lights inside the ship were big blue ones, very sharp and blinding, throwing black shadows in every corner. Not a canny sort of place at all, for a chap to be in at that time of the morning—or any other time, my grandfather thought.

They took him through a whole maze of passages, until he didn't know up from down—he said you seemed to be hanging in the air half the time, until you got onto the next bit of the ship, and then you'd suddenly discover that what you'd taken to be the ceiling was very likely one of the walls. He said it made nonsense of any man's sense of direction, and he'd been used to the marshes all his life, where every tussock looks the same as the next. At last they showed him a little bit of a thing they said was the engine.

"Fair an' honest, Ernie," he said to me, "that weren't no bigger'n a little old two-stroke. Fair beat me, that did, a tiddlin' piece, like yon in a craft so big. Any road, 'tweren't

much wrong with 'un—summat strained and sprung apart like, as I could have done on the spot, only for not havin' the spares by me. That whole ship were byordinary battered about, too, taken a good old poundin', she had."

The Martians were asking him politely what he could do for them, and all he could tell them was they'd need new parts, and he couldn't say for certain where he'd get 'em, nor yet when.

He said, though, that he rather thought he might be able to batter out something that would do the job for them. They chatted about amongst themselves for a bit, and then they wanted to know how long. At least, that's what he made it out to be. What they actually said was, "Mr. Jack Beade, you realize the grave urgency of this affair? The safety of the whole nation—nay, the world—depends upon it. The Prime Minister wishes me to inform you that your work must go forward with the greatest dispatch. The sands of time are running out. The eyes of millions are upon you. How soon can you let us have the secret formula?"

My grandfather said, maybe a week, maybe ten days. One of the Martians said, "Well, here we are, settled down in our hiding-place for our planned ten-week observation of the habits of Alaskan seals. We'll be sending regular bulletins, to let you know how we get on. Our food supplies are good, and our morale is high; and with luck we'll soon be able to provide the world with absolutely unique material about these queer denizens of the underwater world."

The Martian that had taken my grandfather to the ship said, "Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it. Which way I turn is hell, myself am hell."

My grandfather gave him to understand pretty shortish that Dick's End wouldn't be much more pleased about it than what he was. We keep ourselves to ourselves down this way, and we don't much care for foreigners wandering about. It's not healthy, and it's not what we're used to.

Well, in the end, they settled to get my grandfather to go ahead making the parts; and they set about digging themselves in and making themselves at home; and in the morning, when all the other Dick's Enders got out of their beds, there was this great Martian craft lying on their door-

steps in old Tedman's long pasture ; and his sheep almost jumping the dyke, fair wild to get out of it.

Tedman was fair wild, too. He wanted to have the law on them for trespassing, but, since none of us knew how to set about having the law on a Martian, and, any road, the law isn't all that almighty popular in our parts, he left it lie in the end.

Naturally, Dick's Enders fought a bit shy of them to begin with, but they weren't all that different to look at, once you'd got used to the fur and the size and the ears ; and by and by some of the kids come chucking stones at them, and calling names, and their mothers come hauling them off, and telling what they'd do to them, and in the end, they got fairly friendly.

They wasn't a bad lot at all, by all accounts. Very anxious to fit in with everything that was going on, from the Young Wives' Union down to old Ticky Darp's bit of a still in the burned-out barn behind the post-office, and trying hard not to make themselves a nuisance to no one.

There was a good bit of difficulty at first, about what they was to eat, and how they was to pay for it. Their own stores had been knocked about a fairish deal by whatever they'd been through—called it a photon storm, my grandfather said they did—and there wasn't a lot they thought fit to eat, so they told the village people. We're generous enough down at Dick's End, as long as be you don't expect anything unreasonable, and the kids kept offering 'em iced lollies and such, and chewing gum ; and then they tried some of Ticky's home-brew, and what with one thing and another, some of the Martians come down real poorly with stomach complaints. But they soon found out what their stomachs could manage and what they couldn't, though I don't know if they ever did manage to discover what they was supposed to do with Vicar's wife's quince jelly.

Vicar himself kept away from them. He was in a real taking over Martians in Tedman's field, because to begin with he didn't believe in Martians anyway, and he couldn't nowise persuade himself they was true. And then he told Joe Crabbe, his church-warden, that even if he did hallucinate himself into believing he saw such a creature, he couldn't have trusted himself not to discuss religion with it,

and he didn't know which of 'em was likely to offend the other most.

The Martians was a sociable lot, like most travelling men. They come to be very friendly with the young fellows, talking to them on the bridge and in the lanes of an evening ; and one of them that was particular fast at picking up things, learnt to whistle after young Susan Proudfoot, just like every other chap under seventy in the village.

Well, that brought Vicar's wife down on them hotfoot. She got the captain to line 'em all up, and she laid into 'em, like it was church parade in the army. Half the village leant over the fence and listened.

She began by saying she knew they was far from their homes, but they had to respect the young womanhood of our village. How would they like it, she asked, if our chaps went and landed on their home, and walked around whistling at their women? She wanted them to exercise their self-control, and leave our girls as they found them.

Most of our chaps on the fence thought this was going a bit too far, seeing as about half the village had left Susan Proudfoot as they found her. Captain was very nice about it, though. He bent down and said: "Thank you for your message—I'm sure all our viewers must realize that it is high time this state of affairs was remedied. Please send any donations to me at this address. Our sincerest thanks to you all for your help and support."

Bert Cole and his cousin Harry, that had both got a name for liking the girls, stopped behind to have a word with Vicar's wife afterwards, and they both told her very earnest that they'd no more dream of chasing Martian women than fly.

My grandfather reckons he'd have given something to know what the Martian captain snapped out to his men afterwards in their own language.

But the one that was most fed up of all about the whole affair was young Artie Symonds. He was always a bit simple, though a nice enough chap in his way, and he'd been spending more than he was worth on Susan, in the way of the pictures most Saturday nights, and fish and chips afterwards, not to mention the petrol his old motor-bike needed to get 'em both twenty miles or so into what you might call the bright lights of civilization. Any other man

in the village under about sixty or so could have told him a quicker short cut from A to B, so to speak, but Artie had picked up some of Vicar's wife's ideas about the pure young womanhood of the village, and he wasn't having it no other way. I said he was always a bit simple. Any road, he told one of his mates he felt as if his Susan's name had been just about dragged through the mud, not that any public mention had been made, but aspersions had been cast, he says, and everybody knew who it was that was intended, and he wanted to see her righted. He was the chap that was going to prove to the village that she wasn't the kind of girl that'd encourage no furry sons of—well, what he called them meant he didn't think they was any sort of inter-planetary travellers. So the upshot of that was, that he was more set on Susan than ever, and hardly an evening went by but you might have seen the pair of them setting off for Grout's Lane, what the Vicar refers to sometimes in his stronger moments as our local Sodom and Gomorrah. Though by all accounts, Artie could have done most of his courting on the old bench with one bar missing by the duckpond, without giving offence.

I don't reckon myself it would have lasted long at that rate, any road, Susan being what she is, and an impatient sort of girl, into the bargain, though I daresay she didn't mind a bit of a change, but as it turned out, the Martians chopped it all off short, after all.

If young Artie hadn't been such a loose-mouthed gabbling fellow, maybe nobody would ever have known anything about it, outside himself and Susan and the Martian, but being what he was he had to go telling his pals all about it, and they wasn't the ones to keep a good story to themselves; and before long, it was all over the village that, Artie had taken Susan up to Grout's Lane one evening, and he hadn't more than started to get cracking, when a Martian with a sort of pad thing in one hand and a little round buzzing object in the other falls through the hedge almost on top of them. Artie says it's his belief that it was the same Martian they'd taught to whistle after Susan: at first they all seemed to look alike, but after a bit you got to see they had different faces, same as human beings.

"I represent the 'Daily Recorder', Sir Harold," says the Martian. "I wonder if you have any objection to giving a

demonstration to an impartial observer—in the interests of science, of course. Will Lucy Fairfax win through?—will she hold out against the blandishments of the sinister Clive Winterbottom? What will happen if the Bagginses succeed in buying Ma Lovejoy's cottage? Do not miss the next episode of this enthralling serial! This is your roving science reporter signing off—remember that only on this wavelength can you depend upon obtaining a full, factual and unbiased account of science in the raw."

When Artie finally got what the chap was driving at, he wanted to punch him up a bit, but he couldn't very well do that, on account of the size, and him not being much of a fighter at the best of times. The Martian was acting very persuasive, and Susan was quite willing to give it a go, and finally Artie agreed to have what the Martian called 'the preliminary love-play of these interesting little creatures' recorded on this Martian's notebooks, just for scientific interest. But he said very firmly he wasn't going no further with Susan than what he would have in the ordinary way, and the Martian had to agree, though Artie said he seemed mortal disappointed. Well, I mean, you can see the poor chap's point of view. There he was, millions of miles from his home, with a chance no Martian had ever had before of observing the courting techniques of an Earthman, and he had to pick about the one man in the village that wanted to keep himself pure. For his marriage.

Well, Artie told his mates, he simply couldn't seem to get down to it some way—couldn't rightwise bring himself to get enthusiastic about it at all. Susan spoke to him pretty sharp, and the Martian was looking sort of encouraging and reproachful at the same time, but it didn't do no good, and in the end, Artie just unwound Susan's arms and ran for it, leaving her and the Martian staring after him in a disgusted sort of way. He should have had the sense to keep it to himself—some of the young chaps were set on mentioning it every time they see him, and when they give him to understand, a bit later on, that Susan had been seen helping the scientific Martian out with his experiments, private-like, he was like to go off his head nearly.

Then somebody in the 'Highwayman' started the Martians off on shove-ha'penny. They'd been asked often

enough to come up for half a pint of rough by the boys that chatted to them on the bridge. It's funny, what rough does to a Martian, almost like they was used to being teetotal. They sing a bit in their queer way, and then they put their heads down and weep into their mugs. There isn't a penny to choose between them and old Mrs. Rose after she's had one too many and wants to tell you about her three dead husbands, and sings the 'Courting of the Hound', quavering away in her high-pitched old voice. The Martians thought it lovely, and the 'Hound' is seven hundred years old if it's a day, so that'll show you. Nat had to keep 'em down to half-a-pint in an hour, because some of the customers was saying if they couldn't have their beer without music, they'd go elsewhere—not that they would have done, elsewhere being the 'Dun Cow', twelve miles off.

But shove-ha'penny, now, they took to that miraculous, except for one poor puny little nine-foot fellow that'd sit in a corner playing Liar Dice with Thatcher Harris. They beat nearly everyone that came in the place; and if they lost, of course, they wanted to stand drinks. They was a proud lot, and having none of our cash, they come in one evening and offered Nat some of theirs. Great shiny wooden shapes—queer, lovely stuff, all polished and smooth, with a beautiful grain. At first Nat couldn't see what ever good he'd do with it. But they was a bright set of creatures, those Martians, and they persuaded him that they could set about carving the stuff into all sorts of figures and candlesticks and that, that would sell.

"The primitive craftsman of this remote tribe," says one of them, "manage to eke out a bare existence by making little figurines and crude implements, which they sell to tourists, or sometimes to the wealthier members of their own race. Here are a few examples of this native art, the survival of an earlier age." So after that, there was no more trouble about the Martians paying their own way, and they had enough to buy their own food, and pay for their drinks and lost at shove-ha'penny if they wanted to, though they didn't often do that. Plenty of folk in the village found a use for a Martian souvenir, and the carrier took them abroad to the other towns and villages, and managed to sell a fair few that way. Seems an awful waste of money, though—I reckon they must have been pretty short when

they got back to base. Imagine melting down a lot of ha'pennies and casting little animals from them, if we was to be cast away on Mars!

The first I saw of the Martians was when I come home on leave one night, and nipped into the 'Highwayman' before going to my grandfather's where I usually slept. I knew he'd be there all right, and I wanted to surprise him. I'd grown a moustache, and I was in my uniform, and it was odds he wouldn't know me at first. Nat didn't, any road; he served me a pint from the barrel where he dumps the leavings from the other barrels, and gave me the grunt he gives to foreigners when they wish him 'good evening'. It could mean 'Thank you, kindly', or 'How's your father?' or 'B . . . off', or anything else you care to name.

I'd just put half the pint down, and was gasping a bit, not having realized before what Nat had given me, when I see a mortal great arm slide through from the public, with white fur all over it, and a couple of thumbs and a tankard on each. One of the Martians handing back the empties, see.

"Holy Moses!" I said. "What in the name of creation's that?"

Old Nat pokes his head round and sizes up the situation in a flash. "I'd as soon you didn't pass remarks about that poor fellow, sir, if you don't mind. He's got a very unfortunate condition, has my cousin Ted, and we feels it very deeply in the family." Nat don't want a whole horde of newspaper people and scientists and government chaps and other foreigners poking about in Dick's End, any more than any of the rest of them, good for business or no.

"The only cousin of yours I ever knew was called Polly, and she worked out at Sheldreake's Farm, and she had a very unfortunate condition too, after she'd been egg-collecting with Bill Sperrit a time or two. But it didn't end up with her looking anything like that," I says. Nat takes a good hard look at me after that, and damn me but he was relieved.

"Come here, frightening the daylight's out of me, Ernie Beade," he growls. "Oh, that's only the Martians that have taken over Tedman's field. Come and meet 'em."

They were just finishing one game of shove-ha'penny, and after my grandfather had told them that me and Stevie

Tupper was unbeaten for the district, nothing would do them but they must have a match with us. I'd had most of a pint of rough by that time, and I will say they seemed like a lot of downright good chaps to me, white fur or no, and I wasn't the boy to cry off three horses of the old shove-ha'penny, whether it was with the Black Man himself or some of his creatures.

I never seen anyone play like that Martian captain though. Some hits the disc with their thumb-ball, and some with the flat of a hand, but he turned his whole great hand round on his wrist, as if it were more than double-jointed, and hit kind of half with the back and half with the side of it. Very pretty way of timing his shots he had, too; half the knack is a way of knowing how to use the discs that's no good, being over the line, sort of like buffers. He had that to a T. Nat told me that before they taught him the rules proper he used to fill the top bed by bouncing 'em off the headboard, not knowing they wasn't in play after they'd gone past the last line.

You never heard a pub so quiet as it was during that last horse of ours. Stevie and me won the first all right. They'd a bit of a disadvantage, the Martians, being so tall, and they had to stoop till it gave them a fair old backache. I reckon that was the only thing that stopped them coming first in every game they ever played. Stevie, being a bit of a show-off, managed to fill in the top bed his first three turns, and then he had to get silly. I was quietly messing about in the middle, but Stevie he says he'll fill in the next to top bed as well and show 'em how 'tis done. Well, I'm passing no downright accusations, mind, but one of the Martians that was leaning over to watch, real interested like, just accidentally tips his tankard and pours a little trickle of ice-cold rough down young Stevie's neck, when he's leaning over to push, and he puts one into the next to top bed all right, but he also shoots two that he was using as buffers, like I said, a bit too hard into the top bed as well as the three he's had already, thus giving 'em to the Martians. There was very nearly another of those nasty international what'd'yecallems over that, especially when the Martian captain cleared his throat and shook Stevie by the hand and said, "I can assure you all I'm very happy to be here tonight, and to have the opportunity of paying this

well-deserved tribute to such a grand old sportsman as my friend here. We all know his contributions to the game—few men have done more for this noble and historic sport, or have played their part in a more manly and unselfish fashion.”

Anyway, Stevie sobered down after that, and filled in the bottom bed very nice and quiet. We had more difficulty with the middle beds than we had ought to have had, me being out of practice in the Army, and Stevie still mopping the back of his neck and wishing for a dry shirt, but still, as I said, we won it in the end. The next horse, the Martians went through us like autumn fires in a stubble field. I don't think they missed a bed, turn and turn about, though they did hand us one over on the way. It was what you might call an exhibition game.

Then time come up for last orders, and Stevie and I bought up for the Martians, and Stevie requested the Martain that had spilt rough down his neck to move over into the corner. Very polite he was, and said it went to his heart to see good rough cider go to waste, and the Martian seemed to understand him all right and took it quite quiet.

That third game was a devil, though. It seemed as if we couldn't either pair do a thing right. Mind, by that time, most of those present had a pint in either hand and was drinking alternate, because when Nat calls time he just-about means it, on account of his wife liking to get a good night's sleep, her doing the milk round as well. Some chap I won't name, because I don't want to be thought one that goes about giving other folk bad reputations, tried to help out by blowing pipe smoke into the Martian captain's face-piece thing, but even Stevie and me got a bit narked about a dirty trick like that. I mean, cider down the neck is a calculated risk, as you might say, but the stuff Thatcher had in his pipe was downright poisonous. So the Martians got a free round of drinks from Thatcher, though he swore all he had left on him was his wife's egg-money. Leastways, he calls her his wife, and she gave him twins twenty-year back, though they say she's got another grown-up family living over by Allford.

Funny thing, though, it was Thatcher's free round did for the Martians in the end. They could hold a couple of tankards on each hand, see, having two thumbs, and being

as this was a match. Nat let them have a bit more than they was usually allowed, and the captain come over all giggly. He puts his tankards down, and takes a mighty swipe at his disc, and hits the board instead, and bangs it so hard that the batten that's holding it steady against the table goes flying, and that means no more play. We didn't have no rule for that, but Nat judges that them that broke the board loses the game, and he'll have it mended for us by next night.

"How do that little old airyplane o' yourn work, then?" one of the chaps asks the Martian captain, while we was all drinking up as fast as we could go. "Proper funny old carry-on, ain't he? Do all right for takin' of sheep to market, eh?"

The Martian captain draws himself up very stately, catching his head a nasty crack against the ceiling, and starts explaining.

We couldn't make much out of it, though, whether it was the rough or not, all except Vicar's son, that was usually up learning some sort of course at the college in Oxford at that time of year; not just then he wasn't, though, being as he'd had a bit of an argument with the head chap at the college over some young woman that had been where she oughtn't to have latish at night. I don't reckon much would have come of it, if it hadn't been that the head chap thought she was his young woman, not Vicar's son's. Any road, as I was saying, he got very interested, and said to Nat it was converting of rotary motion into unidirectional motion, which Nat didn't take no stock in, until Vicar's son explained that just as things was going round you made 'em go straight forward; and Nat said that'd be downright useful to Mrs. Rose of a Saturday night, and Mrs. Rose took a huff and went off home without paying for her last beer.

Then my grandfather come over very serious. He says to the Martian captain, "Do seem to me that ain't right we shouldn't have a natty little bit of a thing like that in these parts. Come in byordinary useful, that would. Running trips to the Moon, see, in the summer and that. Damn if I don't think you did ought to give me a drawing-up of how 'tis done, and when I got Mrs. Teape's hen-houses by and

finished with, I'd give it a thought and see if I couldn't batter something out."

The Martian captain looks very thoughtful, and says, "Tonight's talking point is a subject that has engaged critics for and against throughout the ages—the education of backward races. Whether we owe primitive tribes the benefits which they are never likely to obtain without our assistance, or whether, in so doing, we should be sullyng the primal purity of latter-day Edens—whether we are more likely to corrupt a culture still in its infancy by bestowing too soon the aids to a more rapid progress, or whether we simply assist the naturally slow process of civilization by speeding it up, as we might hasten artificially a laboratory reaction—these are some of the views that you will hear in this programme, and concerning which, we hope you will make, after mature consideration, your own decisions." Then he looks round at all his men, jerks his head and collects 'em up, and they all stalk off into the night.

It wasn't more than a few nights later that my grandfather fitted them up with their little bits and pieces in their engine, and stood back, while they took it up a trial trip, to make sure it'd float all right, so to speak. They landed again, and took in some food on board, and a few casks of rough, leaving Nat short till the brewer's van come round again. Then they asked my grandfather to apologize for them to Jack Pye, the president of the Tarot Club, and to say they was sorry they wouldn't be able to come and judge the Easter Sports, like he'd asked; and the great ship closed its hatches down and took off before you could say knife. That just lifted itself up off the ground, very slow and steady like, with no more than a puff of blue smoke, and then all in a flash it was gone.

I went back to the Army soon after that, and my grandfather not being a great hand at writing, no more than talking, I didn't hear any more news from Dick's End, apart from a tally Thatcher sent me up by a North-bound lorry-driver, round about September, with some of the harvest tidings on it, till I come out of the army, about end of October.

The first thing I heard when I got back was that Susan Proudfoot had had her baby the day before I come out.

Bit before expected it was, but a good fourteen pounds of it, biggest baby in the parish since Long Tom Frumenty, and a real pretty little girl, barring it was all covered with white down. Vicar preached a fire-and-damnation of a sermon the Sunday after, all about the sins of Misky Jenation. I reckon his wife must have been on to him to calm down about it, though, because the Sunday after that, he had one about the brotherhood of nations and how if we'd all made up our minds to love each other from the start of creation there wouldn't be no war, nor yet no separation among the planets, but we'd all be on weekend visiting terms. He said it was like the Tower of Babel, we'd all been friends and ever so close together at the start of things, but then we'd got uppish amongst ourselves, and the good Lord had stretched out his mighty hand and pushed all the planets apart, and taken away the secret of space-flight. All these Unidentical Flying Objects, he said, came from other planets that had got back on the road to being good and loving, and they'd got their space-flight back again. It was fair beautiful to hear, the way he'd got it all worked out, and when he give out the hymn, he said if anyone wanted to hear any more about it, they could come up to Vicarage after supper ; and a fair number did, I hear tell, though whether they come for explanations, or a drop of Vicar's wife's birchtwig wine, that was well-liked in the village, I wouldn't like to say.

Then again, the Sunday after *that* was Susan's churching Sunday, and he preached a sermon about brotherly love between the planets that set Mrs. Proudfoot rocking to and fro and weeping into her white gloves till they was all sopped through.

Susan was that set up with having three whole sermons preached round her—even Wanton Jennet back in Cromwell's time only had two before they set her in the ducking-stool—that she wanted to call the baby Misky Jenation. But Mrs. Proudfoot said no, it wasn't a name they'd ever had in the family, and she wasn't going to stand for it.

So in the end they called her Barbara, Vicar explaining that meant a little stranger. Though little she was not, and nigh pulled Vicar into font on top of her, while I was telling Bert Cole that Misky Jenation was what he'd promised

Vicar's wife solemn he and Harry wouldn't get up to with the Martian girls.

We'd hardly got over the christening, when the Martians were back. Down they came out of a milky winter sky one night late in December, and settled back in Tedman's long pasture.

Those sheep of his nearly had a nervous breakdown on the spot, when all those great big furry chaps tumbled out of their ship again.

Seems they'd got thinking over what grandfather said to them, and they'd gone home (which wasn't Mars at all, it turned out, but some planet, very small and chilly, near a place called Boots, I think it was), and they'd got permission to come back and teach us how to build a ship of our own. Only we wasn't to go letting out the secret to any old government people, and that suited us as well as it did them.

So we've been fairish busy since then, knocking up a ship out of some scrap-metal my grandfather got from a friend of his that's in the trade. She don't look pretty, maybe, but she goes all right.

Stevie's been down the workshop, turning out shove-ha'penny boards for the Martians to take back. And young Barbara's Dad spent all his time recording all what she did and said with his little buzzing thing. He don't half tell the tale about it, too! These proud Dads is all alike, though I own she was a forward little thing and could ask for her breakfast as plain as anything at six weeks. He says the clever chaps on his planet'll be very interested in the fact that inter-breeding is possible between the races. So's Bert and Harry Cole.

Well, we're off a week on Monday, following the Martians home. They keep saying what they give us is not so much interplanetary, as interstellar flight, though why they're fussy about that beats me. We can't take the whole of Dick's End, and some of 'em wouldn't come anyway. There'll be me and Stevie and grandfather, and Jack Pye, and Thatcher and a lot of the chaps; and Susan, and little Barbara, coming to see her grandparents. And with a bit of luck, me and Stevie'll be returning in a few weeks with the first Interstellar Shove-Ha'penny Championship under our belts.

— DAPHNE CASTELL

To placate the people who continually write demanding more "Anita" stories, here is—

TIMOTHY

by Keith Roberts

Anita was bored; and when she was bored odd things were liable to happen. Granny Thompson, who studied her grand-daughter far more closely than she would have cared to admit, had been noticing a brooding look in her eyes for some days. She cast about for chores that would keep her mind off more exotic mischief for a time. "There's the 'en run" intoned the old lady. "That wants a good gooin'-uvver fer a start. 'Arf the posts orl of a tip, 'oles every-where. . . . An' the path up ter the you-know-wot. Nearly went on that, yisdey. Place gooin' orl of 'cap, an' yer sits there *moanin'*. . . ."

Anita sneered. "Chicken runs. Paths up to you-know-whats. I want to do something *interesting*, Gran. Like working a brand new spell. Can't we——"

"No we *kent*" snapped the old lady irritably. "Spells, spells, kent think o' nothink but *spells*. You wants ter look a bit lively, my gel. Goo on out an' earn yer kep, sit there chopsin'. . . . Goo on, git summat *done*. Git some o' that fat orf yer. . . ."

Anita hissed furiously. She was very proud of her figure.

"Mackle up that there chair-back in the wosh'ouse" snarled Granny, warming to her theme. "Tek the truck down to ole Goody's place an' git them line props wot's bin cut an' waitin' arf a month. Git rid of orl that muck an' jollop yer chucked down by the copper 'ole a week larst *Toosdey*. Git the three o'clock inter Ket'rin', save my legs fere a change. 'Ole 'eap o' stuff we're run out on. . . ."

"Oh *please* Gran, not today. . . ."

Granny Thompson softened a little. She didn't like going to Kettering either. "Well goo on uvver to Aggie Everetts then an' git a couple of 'andfuls o' flour . . . an' watch she dunt put no chibblins o' nuthink in *with* it. Aggie's sense o' wot's funny ent the same as anybody normal. . . . An' when yer gits back yer kin goo up an' git orl that birdsnest muck out o' the *thack*. I ent 'avin' that game agin,

wadn't the same fer a month larst time I went up that there ladder. . . ."

Anita fled, partly to escape her Granny's inventiveness, partly because there was some truth in the crack about her weight. In the winter she seemed to store fat like a dormouse, there was no answer to it; she'd tried a summer dress on only a day before and there had been too much Anita nearly everywhere. She decided to make a start on the chicken run. Levitation and spellraising were all very well in their way but there was something peculiarly satisfying once in a while in taking ordinary wood and nails and a perfectly normal hammer and lashing about as vigorously as possible. She rapidly tired of the job though. The rolls of wire netting were recalcitrant, possessed of a seemingly infinite number of hooks and snags that all but defied unravelment; once undone, they buried themselves gleefully in her palms. And the ground was soaked and nasty so that worms spurted out whenever she tried to drive a post. Anita leaned on the somewhat dishevelled end frame of the run and yawned. She probed the mind of the nearest of its occupants and got back the usual moronic burbling about the next feeding-time. Hens are easily the most boring of companions.

Anita snorted, pushed back her hair, wiped her hot face and decided to go to Aggie's for the flour. She knew her Granny still had a good stock of practically everything in the larder and that the errand was only an excuse to get her out from underfoot for a while, but that didn't matter. She could take the long path round the far side of Foxhanger; perhaps the wood creatures were waking up by now.

She walked between the trees, well muffled in jeans, boots and donkey jacket. As she moved she scuffed irritably at twigs and leaves. She hated this time of the year with a peculiar loathing. February is a pointless sort of month; neither hot nor cold, neither winter nor spring. No animals, no birds, the sky a dull, uniform grey. . . . Anita hung her head and frowned. If only things would get a move on. . . . There were creatures in old tree stumps and deep in the ground but the few she was able to contact were dozy and grumpy and made it quite clear they wanted to be left alone for another six weeks, longer if possible. Anita

decided she would like to hibernate, curled paws over nose in some brown crackling lair of leaves. Another year she really must try it ; at least she might wake up feeling like doing something.

If she had expected any comfort from Aggie Everett she was disappointed. The old lady was morose ; she had recently developed a head cold, had treated herself with a variety of ancient remedies and felt as she put it 'wuss in consequence.' She was wearing a muffler knotted several times round her thin neck ; her face was pale and even more scrunched-looking than usual while her nose, always a delicate member, glowed like a stop-light. She confided to Anita that things 'orl wanted a good shove, like' ; her nephews would be coming down for the spring equinox and there were great plans for festivities but until then the Witches' Calendar was empty. The boys were away making cardboard boxes in far-off Northampton and there was nothing to do, nothing to do at all. . . .

On the way back Anita took a short cut across part of the Johnson's land and saw Timothy on the horizon. Lacking anything better to do, she detoured so as to pass close by where he stood. She couldn't help noticing that Timothy looked as depressed as she felt. He had been made the previous spring to keep the birds off the new crops, so he was nearly a year old ; and for nine months now he had had nothing to do but stand and be rained on and blown about by the wind and stare at the crown of Foxhanger wood away across the fields. Anita nodded mechanically as she trudged past. "Afternoon, Timothy. . . ." But it seemed he was too tired even to flap a ragged sleeve at her. She walked on.

Twenty yards away she stopped, struck by a thought. She stood still for a moment, weighing possibilities and feeling excited for the first time in weeks. Then she went back, stepping awkwardly on the chunky soil. She set the flour down, put her hands on her hips and looked at Timothy with her head on one side and her eyes narrowed appraisingly.

His face was badly weathered of course, but that was unimportant ; if anything, it tended to give him character. She walked up to him, brushed the laps of his coat and tilted his old floppy hat to a more rakish angle. She made

motions as if parting his wild straw hair. Timothy watched her enigmatically from his almond-shaped slits of eyes. He was a very well built scarecrow ; the Johnson boys had put him together one week-end when they were home from College and Anita, who loved dolls and effigies, had watched the process with delight. She prodded and patted him, making sure his baling-wire tendons had not rotted from exposure. Timothy was still in good order ; and although he was actually held up by a thick stake driven into the ground he had legs of his own, which was a great advantage. Anita walked round him, examining him with the air of a connoisseur. There were great possibilities in Timothy.

She moved back a few paces. Her boredom was forgotten now ; she saw the chance of a brand new and very interesting spell. She squatted on her heels, folded her arms and rocked slightly to aid concentration. Around her, winter-brown fields and empty sky waited silently ; there was no breath of wind. Anita opened her eyes, ran through the incantation quickly to make sure she had it firmly set in her mind. Then she waved a hand and began to mutter rapidly.

A strange thing happened. Although the day remained still something like a breeze moved across the ground to Timothy. Had there been grass it might have waved ; but there was no grass, and the soil twinkled and shifted and was still again. The wind touched the scarecrow and it seemed his shoulders stiffened, his head came up a trifle. One of his outstretched arms waved ; a wisp of straw dropped from his cuff and floated to the ground. The stake creaked faintly to itself.

Anita was vastly pleased. She stood and did a little jig ; then she looked round carefully. For a moment she was tempted to finish the job on the spot and activate Timothy ; but the Johnson farmhouse was in sight and scarecrows that talk and walk, and sing maybe and dance, are best not seen by ordinary folk. Anita scurried off with her head full of plans. Twenty yards away she remembered the flour and went back for it. Timothy stirred impatiently on his post and a wind that was not a wind riffled the ragged tails of his coat. "Sorry," called Anita. "I'll come back tonight, we can talk then. Besides I'd better look up the

rest of the trick, just to be sure." She skipped away, not turning back again, and Timothy might or might not have waved. . . .

The sky was deep grey when she returned, and the swell of land on which the scarecrow stood looked dark and rough as a dog's back. Timothy was silhouetted against the last of the light, a black drunken shape looking bigger than he really was. Anita breathed words over him, made passes ; then she undid the wire and cord that held him to his stake and Timothy slid down and stood a little uncertainly on his curious feet. Anita held his arm in case he tumbled and broke himself apart. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"Stiff," said Timothy. His voice had a musty, earthy sort of quality and when he opened his mouth there was an old smell of dry soil and libraries. Anita walked slowly with him across the furrows ; for a time he tottered and reeled like an old man or a sick one, then he began to get more assurance and strode out rapidly. At first his noseless round face looked odd in the twilight but Anita soon got used to it. After all Timothy was a personality, and personalities do not need to be conventionally handsome. She crossed the field with the scarecrow jolting beside her, headed for the cover of the nearest trees.

She found Timothy's mind was as empty as a thing could be ; but that was part of his charm, because Anita could stock it with whatever she wanted him to know. At first the learning process was difficult because one question had a knack of leading to a dozen others and often the simplest things are hardest to explain. Thus,

"What's night?"

"Night is now. When it's dark."

"What's dark?"

"When there isn't any light."

"What's light?"

"Er. . . . Light is when you can see Foxhanger across the fields. Dark is when you can't."

"What's 'see' . . . ?"

Anita was on firmer ground when it came to the question of scarecrows.

"What's a scarecrow?"

"A thing they put in a field when there are crops. The birds don't come because they think it's a man."

"I was in a field. Am I a scarecrow?"

"No, you're not. Well maybe once on a time, but not any more. I changed you."

"Am I a man?"

"You will be. . . ." And Anita leaned on the arm of the giant and felt the firmness of his wooden bones, and was very proud.

Timothy was back in his place by first light and Anita spent some time scuffing out tracks. When the scarecrow walked he had a way of plonking his feet down very hard so they sank deeply into the ground. If old Johnson saw the marks he might take it into his head to wait up and see what queer animal was on the prowl, and Anita hated the thought of Timothy being parted by a charge from a twelve bore. She was only just beginning to find out how interesting he could be.

During the following weeks Granny Thompson had little cause for complaint. She rarely saw her grand-daughter ; in the daytime Anita was usually mugging up fresh spell-work, or trying with the aid of a hugely battered Britannica to solve some of the more brilliant of Timothy's probings ; and at night she was invariably and mysteriously absent. Her Granny finally raised the question of these absences.

"*Gallivantin'*" snorted the elder Thompson. "Yore got summat *on*, I knows that. The question is, *wot?*"

"But Gran, I don't know what you mean. . . ."

"Kep me up 'arf the night larst night," pronounced Granny. "I could 'ear yer, gooin' on. Chelp chelp chelp, ev'ry night alike, but I kent 'ear nothink *answer*. . . ." And then with a suddenly gimlet-like expression, "Yore got a *bloke* agin my gel, that's wot. . . ."

"Really, Gran," said Anita primly. "The very *idea*. . . ."

"Anita, what's a witch?"

"I've told you a dozen times, Timothy. A witch is somebody like me or Gran, or Aggie Everett I suppose. We can . . . talk to all sorts of people. Like yourself. Normal folk can't."

"Why can't other people talk to me?"

"Well they . . . it's hard to explain. It doesn't matter anyway, you've got me. I talk to you. I made you."

"Yes, Anita. . . ."

"I've got a new dress," said Anita, pirouetting. Timothy stood stiffly by the gate and watched her. "An' new shoes . . . but I'm not wearing them tonight because I don't want the damp to spoil them. I've got all new things because it's spring." She held her hand out to Timothy and felt the brittle strength in him as he helped her over the gate. He had a sort of clumsy courtesy that was all his own. "Anita, what's spring?"

Anita was exasperated. "It's when . . . oh, the birds come back from Africa, don't ask me where's Africa because I shan't tell you . . . and there's nice scents in the air at night and the leaves come on the trees and you get new clothes and you can go out and everything feels different. I like spring."

"What's 'like'?"

Anita stopped, puzzled. "Well it's . . . I don't know. It's a feeling you have about people. I like you for instance. Because you're gentle and you think about the things I think about." Overhead a bat circled and dipped and the evening light showed redly through his wings and for a moment he almost spoke to Anita; then he saw the gauntness walking with her along the path and spun back up into the sky. "I shall have to teach you about liking," said Anita. "There's still so many things you don't know." She pelted ultrasonics after the noctule but if he was still in range he didn't answer. "Come on Timothy," she said. "I think we'll go to Deadman's Copse and see if the badgers are out yet."

"Spells," said Anita. "Marjoram and wormsblood and quicksilver and cinnabar. Mandrakes and tar and honey. Divination by sieve and shears. Can you remember all that?"

"Yes, Anita."

"You've got a very good brain Timothy, you remember practically everything now. You've got most of the standard manual word for word, and I only read it through to you once. You really could be very useful. . . . I think you're developing what they call a Balanced Personality. Though there's so much to put in, I still keep remembering bits I haven't done. . . . Would you like to learn poetry?"

"What's poetry?"

Anita fumed momentarily, then started to laugh. "I'm tired of defining things, it gets harder all the time. We shall just have to do some, that's all ; I'll bring a book tomorrow." And the day after she brought the book ; it was one of her treasures, heavy and old and bound with leather. She opened Timothy's mind till he could read Shakespeare better than a man, then they went to Drawback Hill to get a dramatic setting and Anita found Timothy's withered lips were just right for the ringing utterances of the old mad Lear. Next night they did a piece of *Tempest*, choosing for it the ghostly locale of Deadman's Copse. Anita read Ariel, although as she pointed out she was a little too well-developed for the part. Timothy made a fine Prospero ; the cursing boomed out in great style although the bit about pegging people in oaks was if anything rather too realistic. When Timothy spoke the words Anita could see quite clearly how bad it would be to get mixed up with the knotty entrails of a tree as big as that.

The next day it rained, making the ground soggy and heavy. Mud covered Anita's ankles before she was halfway across the field. Timothy looked a little sullen and there was a pungent, rotting smell about his clothing that she found alarming. "It's no good," she said, "we shall just have to get you under cover. I hate the idea of you standing out all the time ; I don't expect you mind though."

"Anita, what's 'mind'?"

By mid-April Anita would normally have been busying herself about a hundred and one things connected with the field creatures and their affairs, but she was still mainly pre-occupied with Timothy. Somehow she had stopped thinking of him as a scarecrow ; the thing she had woken up was beginning to work by itself now and often when she came to release him he would bubble with notions of his own that had come to him in the grey time before the sun drained away his power. He asked her how she knew the bats called each other and why she was always sure when the weasel was too close for comfort ; so she gave him a sixth sense, and portions of the seventh, eighth and ninth for good measure. Then she could leave him standing on watch in his field and scurry off on her own business and Timothy would tattle and wheeze out the night's news when next he saw her. He found out where the fieldmice

were building, and how the hedgepigs were faring on their rounds; then one of the hares under Drawback was taken by a lurcher and Timothy heard the scream and told Anita stiffly, making the death seem like a lab report; and Anita angrily gave him emotions and after that the tears would squeeze from somewhere and roll down his football face whenever he thought about killing.

A week later Anita came home with the dawn to find her Granny waiting for her. "This," said the old lady without preamble, "'as gotta *stop*."

Anita flung herself down in one of the big armchairs and yawned. "Wha', Gran. . . ."

"Gallivantin' " said Granny Thompson sternly. "Muckin' about wi' that gret thing uvver at the Johnsonses. *Ugghhh*. . . . Giz me the creeps it does straight. . . . Gret mucky thing orl straw an' stuff, sets yer teeth on edge ter *think* on it. . . ." She crossed to one of the little windows and opened it. A breeze moved cold and sweet, ruffling Anita's hair. The room was shadowy but the sky outside was bright; somewhere a bird started to sing, all on his own. "*Gallivantin'* " said Granny again, as if to clinch matters.

Anita was nearly asleep; she'd used a lot of power that night and she was very tired. She said dreamily "He's not a thing. Gran. He's Timothy. He's very sweet. I invented him, he knows about everything. . . ." Then a little more sharply, "*Gran!* How did you know——"

Granny Thompson sniffed. "I knows wot I *knows*. . . . There's ways an' means, my gel. . . . Some as even you dunt know, artful though yer might be. . . ."

Anita had a vision of something skulking in hedgerows, pouring itself across open ground like spilled jam. A very particular vision this, it lashed its tail and spat. She said reproachfully "You didn't play fair. You used a Familiar. . . ."

Granny looked virtuous. "I ent sayin' I *did*, an' there agin I ent sayin' I *didn't*. . . ."

"It was Vortigern," said Anita, pouting. "It must have been. None of the others would peach on me. But *him*. . . ."

"Never mind 'ow I *knows*," said Granny Thompson sternly. "Or 'oo tole me. The thing is, yore gone fur *enough*. Any more an' I wunt be risponsible, straight I wunt. . . ."

"But Gran, he's nice. And . . . well, I'm sorry for him.

I don't like to think of him being left on his own now. It would be . . . well, like somebody dying almost. He's too clever now, can't just . . . eeeeeohhh . . . jus' leave him li' that. . . ."

"Clever," muttered Granny, looking at the wall and not seeing it. "That ent no call fer pity. . . . You save yer pity fer the next world my gel, there ent no place fer it 'ere. . . . Brains, pah. Straw an' dirt an' muck orf the fields, that's brains. Same with 'im, same with 'em orl. You'll learn. . . ."

But the homily was lost on Anita ; she had incontinently fallen asleep.

She dreamed of Timothy that morning, woke and slept again to see if he would come back. He did ; he was standing far away in his field and waving his arms to her and calling but his voice was so thick and distant she couldn't hear the words. But he wanted something, that was plain ; and Anita woke and blinked, thought she knew what it was, and forgot again. She rubbed her eyes, saw the sunlight, felt the warmth of the air. It was lunchtime, and the day was as hot as June.

The fields were dark and rough and a full moon was rising. Anita crossed the open ground behind Foxhanger. A hunting bird called, close and low ; she stopped and saw distant woods humped on their hills, looking like palls of smoke in the moonhaze. Timothy was waiting for her, a tiny speck a long way off in the night. When she reached him he looked gaunter than ever ; his fingers stuck out in bundles from his sleeve, and his hat was askew. The night wind stirred his coat, moonlight oozed through the tatters and rags. Anita felt a queer stirring inside her ; but she released him as usual and Timothy wriggled from the stake and dropped awkwardly to the ground. He said "It's a lovely night, Anita." He took an experimental step or two. "After you'd gone this morning my leg broke ; but I mended it with wire and it's all right again now." Anita nodded, her mind on other things. "Good," she said. "Good, Timothy, that's fine. . . ."

In February the ground had been bare and red-brown ; now the harshness was lost under a new green hair. That was the corn Timothy had been made to protect. She took his arm. "Timothy," she said. "Let's walk. I'm afraid I've got an awful lot to say."

They paced the field, on the path that was beaten hard where the tractor came each day ; and Anita told Timothy about the world. Everything she knew, about people dying, and living, and hoping ; and how all things, even good things, get old and dirty and worn-out, and the winds blow through them, and the rain washes them away. As it has always been, as it will be forever until the sun is cold. "Timothy," she said gently, "One day . . . even my great Prince will be dust. It will be as though He had never been. He, and all the people of His house. Nobody knows why ; nobody ever will. It's just the way things are."

Timothy jolted gravely alongside ; Anita held his thin arm and although he had no real face she could tell by his expression that he understood what she was saying. "Timothy," she said. "I've got to go away. . . ."

"Yes, Anita. . . ."

She swallowed. "It's right what Gran says. You're old now and nearly finished and there are so many other things to do. I haven't been fair, Timothy. You've just been a . . . well, a sort of toy. You know . . . I wasn't ever really interested in you. You were just something I made when I was bored. You sort of grew on me."

"Yes, Anita. . . ."

They turned at the farthest end of their walk. The air was wine-warm on her face and arms and Timothy smelled faintly of old brass spoons and what he was thinking about it was impossible to say. "It's spring now," said Anita. "It's the time you put on a new dress and do your hair and find someone nice you can drive with or talk with or just walk along with and watch the night coming and the owls and the stars. They're the things that have to be done because they start right deep down inside you, in the blood. It's the same with animals nearly, they wake up and everything's fresh and green, and it's as if winter was the night and summer is one great long day. . . ."

They had reached Timothy's stake. In the west the sky was still turquoise ; an owl dropped down against the light like a black flake of something burned. Anita propped Timothy against his post. He seemed stiffer already and more lifeless somehow. She put his hat right ; it was always flopping down. As she reached up she saw something shine silver on his wizened-turnip face. She was startled, until she

remembered she had given him feelings. Timothy was crying.

She hugged him then, not knowing what to do. She felt the hardness of him and the crackling dryness, the knobs and angles of his bits-and-pieces body. "Oh, Timothy," she said. "Timothy I'm sorry, but I just can't go with you any more. There won't be any spells for you after this, I've taken the power off. . . ." She stepped back, not looking at him. "I'll go now," she said. "This way's best, honestly. I won't tie you back onto your stick or anything, you can just stand here awhile and watch the bats and the owl. And in the morning you'll just sort of fade away ; it won't hurt or anything. . . ." She started to walk off down the slope, feeling the blades of new corn touch her calves. "Good-bye, Timothy," she called.

Something iron-hard snagged at her. She fell, rolled over horrified and tried to get up. Her ankles were caught ; she wriggled and the night vanished, shut away by rough cloth that smelled of earth. "Love" croaked Timothy. "Please Anita, love. . . ." And she felt his twiggy fingers move up and close over her breasts.

She looped like a caterpillar caught by the tail and her fists hit Timothy squarely, bang-bang. Dust flew, and the seeds of grass ; then Anita was up and running down the hill, stumbling over the rough ground, and Timothy was close behind her, a flapping patch of darkness with his musty old head bobbing and his arms reaching out. His voice floated to her through the night. "Anita . . . love. . . ."

She reached the bottom of the field tousled and too shocked to defend herself at all, cut across the Johnson's stackyard with Timothy still hard on her heels. A dog volleyed barks, subsided whimpering as he caught the strange scent on the air. Back up the hill, a doubling across Home Paddock ; a horse bolted in terror as old cloth flapped at his eyes. Near the hedge Timothy gained once more, but he lost time climbing the gate. Anita spun round fifty yards away. "Timothy, go back! Timothy, No!"

He came on again ; she took three deep breaths, lifted her arm and flung something at him that crackled and fizzed and knocked a great lump of wadding from his shoulder. One arm flopped down uselessly but the rest of him still thumped towards her. Anita was angry now ; her

face was white in moonlight and there was a little burning spot on each cheek and her mouth was compressed till her lips were hardly visible at all. "Scarecrow!" she shouted. "Old dirty thing made of straw! *Spiders' home!*" She'd had time to aim; her next shot took Timothy full in the chest and bowled him backwards. He got up and came on again although he was much slower.

Anita waited for him on the little bridge over the Fynebrook. She stood panting and pushing the hair out of her eyes with each hand in turn and the rage was white-hot now and choking her. Round her, brightnesses fizzed and sparkled; as Timothy came within range she hit him again and again, arms and legs and head. Picees flew from him and bounced across the grass. He reached the bridge but he was only a matchstick man now, his thin limbs glinting under tatters of cloth. Anita took a breath and held it, shut her eyes then opened them very wide, made a circle with her hands, thrust fire at Timothy. His wooden spine broke with a great sound; what was left of him folded in the middle, tumbled against the handrail of the bridge. He fell feet over head into the stream. The current seized him, whirling him off; he fetched up twenty yards away and lay quiet, humped in a reedbed like a heap of broken umbrellas.

Anita moved forward one foot at a time, ready to bolt again or throw more magic; but there was no need. Timothy was finished; he stayed still, the water rippling through his clothes. A little bright beetle shot from somewhere into his coatsleeve, came out at the elbow and scudded away down the stream. Timothy's face was pressed into mud so he could see nothing, but his voice still whispered in Anita's mind. "*Please . . . please . . .*"

She ran again, faster than ever. Along beside the brook, across the meadow, through Foxhanger, up the garden path. She burst into the kitchen of the cottage, spinning Granny Thompson completely round. Took the stairs three at a time and banged her bedroom door shut behind her. She flung herself on the bed and sobbed and wrapped blankets round her ears; but all night long, until the last of the power ran down, she could hear Timothy thinking old mouldy thoughts about rooks and winds, and worms in the thick red ground.

THE WRITING MAN

by M. J. P. Moore

The time was seven minutes past ten and he sat in the room at a kidney-shaped desk. He was writing, with an odd fury of concentration, as if to extinguish all but the monotonous movement of his pen.

(the man wrote)

Just on the edge of his vision something intruded, irritated, he forced his eyes back to the voluptuous sliding of his pen.

(It was the pen cap)

There it was again, no matter how much he tried it came back into his field of vision. All right so there was a pen cap!!

Part of him shrank from this knowledge and its inevitable consequences.

Just a pen cap.

There might be other things?

Write!!

(The man wrote)

Slowly the tension lessened, the man was contented, he was writing, nothing interfered, he was at peace.

(There was a blue tin)

Horried the man almost allowed himself to look directly at this new monstrosity. The pen wavered, the writing was stopping, it mustn't stop, because, it might, because. It must not stop.

(The man wrote)

So there was a blue tin. A tin lid, resting upside down on the desk top, with dirt in it.

(Cigarette ash)

The man ignored the cigarette ash. "I don't smoke, he thought, I haven't smoked for a."

A long time.

There was a mark on the desk top. It was difficult to see it without stopping the writing, but the man managed.

It was like the moon, a pale wooden moon on a dark stained wooden sky.

(And a star)

Someone had written a star on the desk. It had five points.

It was made up of triangles, no not triangles, a line, a line going on for ever.

(The man followed the line)

Something was wrong. What if he couldn't get off the line, he would stay on the star for ever.

(The man stopped writing)

He concentrated, gathering up his strength for the leap, he thought of the friends that were relying on him, his wife, his sister, all of them, all of the Race. He felt both humble and proud.

(It was time)

Concentrate, now. Now!!

(The man wrote)

There was a feeling, of, no, it was the humming. Always when it was the good time when they let him alone (Damn them!!) there was the writing and the humming going on all the time rising and falling, in time with the writing.

That was it!!

It wasn't in time with the writing!

(The time was twenty-seven minutes to eleven)

It had to be in time, the Race couldn't wait much longer, the sands were slipping away, the cold was creeping deeper, soon more babies would die, soon, soon.

It was wrong. It was sinful!!

(Sin is a seven-headed Dragon)

Why seven? Well there was lust and greed and pride. Why pride? Don't argue!! Pride and, and writing. No. NO! NO!!

No not writing, writing was what made it all safe, harmonious, it was good. (Therapy).

Each day he could sit in the room at the desk with the moon and the star and the blue tin-lid and the pen-cap, and write.

They never bothered him when he wrote. They wouldn't let him keep it of course, but then he didn't mind

that so much because (they never guessed) it wasn't what he wrote that mattered, it was the act.

It was his act, really his Act.

(His only act)

Only his act could save the race, others had tried, and failed. They had made tests of course, but somehow it had gone wrong. Now he was the last. (The tests said so.)

It was getting yellow again, the man welcomed this, he liked the yellow time, it was warm.

It had always been warm, as long as he could remember, but it wasn't going to last, one could understand in the mind, but the body would never understand, nor forgive. (The sin.)

She had been beautiful, the man remembered. Gold and brown out of the sun smell and tasting of peaches.

She had warmed him with her smile like the sunshine, and their bodies felt cool and sweet together.

The yellow was gone, gone from the desk, moving over the wooden brick that made the floor. "I used to chase it when I was a child, but I can't do those things now, I am a man."

"I have important work to do. I write."

(The man wrote)

There was pain behind his eyes, they watered, for a moment he couldn't see the writing, then they cleared. The man was frightened, the pain didn't usually come when he was writing, the writing was the safe time. Writing no pain, pain no writing. It was O.K., it hadn't come again. There was still time.

(The time was twenty-seven minutes past eleven)

What was he writing?

He was writing a stream, and a bridge over the stream, and a path.

(The water was cool)

The path meandered over a field and into a wood; there were birds in the air above the wood, calling.

"Her name in ambush behind the laughter of sparrows."

It was good inside the Green. After the yellow, the green was cool but not cold or wet like the place that

(He was inside)

It was odd being inside, like being buried, one's nerve impulses travelling with the viscosity of treacle.

"I must rest"

(He rested)

Yes in the wood one could rest, and listen to the small sounds, rising and falling. The soft insect hum blending with the rustling trees and bird song, high above.

There were small animals too, he liked to watch them scuttling here and there. Small bright eyes, whiskers twitching. Then he'd move, and they'd be gone in a mad scamper of fear.

(Fear)

There was fear here, deep within, he could find it, sense it, within each fibre, each bone, the very dendrities encrusted with fear of. Of!!

She had not been afraid, she didn't know, how could she.

They told her but she wouldn't listen and she died.

(And he was here)

He always wrote the same thing. Each day they came and took it away at the same time.

(The time was seven minutes to twelve)

Today was different somehow, he was tired, the long journey had tired him, jumping from the star.

(This was the last day)

There would be no tomorrow for him or for the race, tomorrow would end today.

(The man wrote)

In another part of the building the electrician made the last adjustments to the electrodes, another man noted in his log.

(The time was twelve mid day)

In the prison graveyard at the rear of the main block, there is a new gravestone. The inscription on it reads: 'Wilhelm. Peter Morris: Born 7th December, 1935, Executed 5th September, 1963.'

(Underneath someone had written "The Race").

— M. J. P. MOORE

AUDITION

by Fred Wheeler

To the eternal glory of British radio-astronomy, it was Jodrell Bank that first received, quite accidentally, a Signal. From Extra-terrestrial Intelligences, without a shadow of doubt.

The radio observatories of the world agreed that the source was a certain intrinsically dim and therefore uncelebrated star some thirty light years away. A very fast computer uncarthed the Signal's pattern, and the Message began to be recorded.

It was supremely logical. Having run quickly through Pythagoras' theorem, the elements of calculus, Gauss' theorem, Maxwell's equations and the essence of general relativity, it supplied the definitive answer to the question of unitary symmetry, which was duly published in *Physical Review Letters* (the editors published a 200-word editorial to the effect that *that* was what they had been asking for in their last editorial, five years previously). The Extra-terrestrial Intelligences asked if there were any questions.

Without, of course, waiting for an answer, the Eties—as they had come to be called—transmitted a basic 5279-word vocabulary, with exhaustive definitions and with illustrations (they used a very awkward 243 by 243 array of 27-ary elements) where necessary.

They then abruptly went dead.

The free world carefully aimed the new Medicine Hat 600-foot steerable bowl, and transmitted its peaceful intentions, a brief description of democracy and a warning against the dangers of Communism.

The Soviet Union, with slightly greater care, aimed the new Onsk 200-metre steerable bowl, and transmitted its peaceful intentions, a brief description of democracy and a warning against the dangers of Capitalism.

The free world transmitted the Constitution of the United States.

The Soviet Union chose a few pages of *Das Kapital* and a picture of some laughing South Vietnamese farm workers.

The free world transmitted one of Churchill's speeches.

The Soviet Union at this point encoded the musical scale and the frequency spectra of the instruments of a symphony orchestra, and broadcast a programme of Shostakovitch.

The free world, cursing, quickly beamed some selections from William Walton, Vaughan Williams, Benjamin Britten, Debussy and the ageing Gil Evans.

In addition, both steerable bowls were elevated out of true by Bach and shaken to their foundation by Beethoven.

The Omsk instrument switched to *War and Peace* unabridged. This kept it occupied while Medicine Hat performed *Hamlet*, ignoring the warnings of certain men of letters who found that, translated back from the 5279-word vocabulary of the Eties, the Prince pondered such burning questions as ". . . whether it is of greater logical validity to be damaged by the obsolete missiles of unreasonable chance or to attack inconvenient waters. . . ."

Fearing to spoil the effects that they had created, the Two Great Powers began to confine themselves to short newscasts, normally weekly except when an outstanding scientific achievement or political crisis justified a special announcement.

Coincident with the 7349th newscast came the Answer.
Don't call us. We'll call you.

— FRED WHEELER

We present the second part of Harry Harrison's great new novel:

MAKE ROOM, MAKE ROOM!

by Harry Harrison

SYNOPSIS

The year is 1999 and the world is a living hell. Overpopulation and overconsumption have caught up with the western world, and there is no essential difference between the teeming slums of London, Bombay or New York City.

Billy Chung is a teen-ager, a native of New York, a child of this world, and he is a murderer. He wanted to steal, but he killed instead, and in murdering the politician Mike O'Brien he has changed a number of lives. Tab Fielding, Mike's bodyguard, is out of a job. Shirl Green, Mike's mistress, has had her life disrupted too. Only Andy Rusch, a police detective, takes the death in his stride, because at least 10 of the city's 35 million inhabitants are murdered every day. But even Andy finds his life changed when he is assigned to investigate the murder and finds himself enjoying the pleasures of the dead man's black market existence—and even the affections of the dead man's girl. For a little while Andy has escaped the realities of the city; dirt, people and violence, all made worse by the unending heat wave. The streets of New York City in August are hell on Earth.

IX

"That's not much of a shave you got there, Rusch," Grassioli said in his normal, irritated tone of voice.

"It's no shave at all, lieutenant," Andy said, looking up

from the sheaf of reports on the desk. The lieutenant had noticed him while he was passing the detective squadroom on the way to the clerical office: Andy had hoped to sign in and leave the precinct without meeting him. He thought fast, "I'm running down some leads over near Shiptown this afternoon, I didn't want to be too obvious. There probably isn't one razor in that whole neighbourhood." That sounded good enough. The truth was he had come in late this morning, direct from Chelsea Park, and never had a chance to shave.

"Yeah. What's the progress on the case?"

Andy knew better than to remind the lieutenant that he had only been working on it since the previous evening.

"I've found out one positive thing that relates to it." He looked around, but there was no one else within ear-shot, and he continued in a lower voice. "I know why the pressure has been put on the department."

"Why?"

The lieutenant flipped through the pictures of Nick Cuore and his henchmen while Andy explained the significance of the heart on the window and the identity of the men who were interested in the murder.

"All right," Grassioli said when he had finished, "don't write a damn thing about this in any reports, unless you find anything leading to Cuore, but I want you to tell me everything what happens. Now get going, you wasted enough time around here."

It was a record breaker. Day after day had passed, but the heat stayed the same. The street outside was a tub of hot, foul air, unmoving and so filled with the stench of dirt and sweat and decay that it was almost unbreathable. Yet, for the first time since the heat wave had set in, Andy did not notice it. The previous night was an overwhelming, though still unbelievable presence, impossible to put out of his mind. He tried to, he had work to do, but Shirl's face or body would slip around the edges of memory and, despite the heat, he would once again feel the sensation of suffused warmth. This wouldn't do! He smashed his right fist into his open palm and had to smile at the startled looks of the nearby people in the crowd. There was work to do, a lot of it, before he could see her again.

He turned into the alleyway that ran between the locked

row of garages behind Chelsea Park and the edge of the moat, leading to the service entrance to the buildings. There was a rumble of wheels behind him and he stepped aside to let a heavy tugtruck pass, a square, box-like body mounted on old auto wheels, guided by the two men who pulled it. They were bent almost double and aware of nothing except their fatigue. As they plodded by, just a few feet from him, Andy could see how the traces cut into their necks, gouging into the permanent ulcers on their shoulders that stained their shirts wet with pus.

Andy walked slowly behind the tugtruck, stopping while he was still out of sight of the entrance, then leaning over the edge of the moat. Filth and rubbish littered the concrete bottom below, and there were wide gaps between the granite blocks where the cement had fallen away. It would be easy enough to climb down the wall after dark, there were no revealing lights nearby. Even in the daytime an intruder would only be noticed by someone glancing out of the closest windows. No one was watching when Andy let himself over the edge and clambered slowly to the bottom: it was like going into an oven here, with the heat trapped by the high walls. He ignored it as best he could and walked along the inner wall until he found the window with the heart on it, it was very easy to spot and would probably be as easily seen at night as well. There was a ledge just below the row of cellar windows and he found he could lever himself up onto it—and it was wide enough to stand on. Yes, it was very possible to jimmy open the window standing here: the murderer could have broken into the building this way. Sweat dripped from his chin and made dark spots on the concrete of the ledge, the heat was getting to him.

"What do you think you're doing there! You're going to get your head broken!" The voice shouted down at him and he straightened and looked up at the drawbridge that crossed the moat, at the doorman standing there, shaking his fist. He recognized Andy and his voice changed abruptly. "Sorry—I didn't see it was you, sir. Anything I can do to help?"

"Yes—get me out of here. Do any of those windows open?"

"Just move along a bit, the next one over your head, it's

a lobby window." The doorman vanished and a few moments later the window creaked open and his wide face stuck out.

"Give me a lift," Andy said, "I'm half cooked." He took the doorman's hand and scrambled up. The lobby was dim and cool after the sun-blasted heat of the moat. He wiped at his face with his handkerchief. "Is there any place where we can talk—where I can sit down?"

"In the guard room, sir, just follow me."

There were two men there; the one in building uniform jumped to his feet when they came in. The other was Tab. "Get on the door, Newton," the doorman ordered. "You want to go with him, Tab?"

Tab glanced at the detective. "Sure, Charlie," he said, and followed the guard out.

"We got some water here," the doorman said. "Want a glass?"

"Great," Andy said, dropping into a chair. He took the plastic beaker and drained half of it, then slowly sipped the rest. Facing him was a grey-tinted window that looked out into the lobby; he couldn't remember seeing any window there on the way in. "One-way glass?" he asked.

"That's right. For the residents' protection. It's a mirror on the other side."

"Did you see where I was in the moat?"

"Yes, sir, it looked like you were just outside the cellar window, the one that got jimmied open."

"I was. I came down the other side of the moat, from the back alley, crossed it and climbed up by the window. If it was night-time do you think you would have seen me there?"

"Well . . ."

"A plain yes or no will do. I'm not trying to trap you into anything."

"The building management, they're already doing something about the security, it's mostly the trouble with the alarm system. No, I don't think I would have seen you at night, sir, not down there in the dark."

"I didn't think so. Then you believe that someone could have entered the building that way, unseen?"

Charlie's small, piggish eyes were half closed, looking

around for aid. "I suppose," he admitted finally, "the killer could have got in that way."

"Good. And that particular cellar room is the right one to come in through. Easy to get near the window, a broken alarm on the frame, everything just right. Whoever broke in could have marked the window with that heart so he could find it again from the outside. Which means he had to have been in the building first, probably casing it."

"Maybe," Charlie admitted, and smiled slightly. "And maybe he made the mark there *after* he got in, just to fool you into believing it was an inside job."

Andy nodded. "You're thinking, Charlie. But either way it could have been marked from the inside first, and I have to operate on that principle. I'll want a list of all the present employees, all the new ones and all those who have left here in the last couple of years, a list of tenants and former tenants. Who would have a thing like that?"

"The building manager, sir, he has an office right upstairs. Would you like me to show you where it is?"

"In one minute—I need another glass of water first."

Andy stood facing the inner door of the O'Brien apartment, pretending to be busy with the list of names he had obtained from the building manager. He knew that Shirl might be looking at him in the door TV and he tried to appear preoccupied and busy. When he had left that morning she had been asleep and he had not talked to her since the previous night—not that they had done much talking then, either. It wasn't that he was embarrassed, it was just that the whole thing still had an air of unreality about it. She belonged here and he didn't, and if she pretended that nothing had happened, or didn't mention it—could he? He didn't think he would. She was a long time answering the door, maybe she wasn't home? No, the bodyguard, Tab, was downstairs, which meant she was still in the building. Was something wrong? Had the killer come back? That was a stupid thing to think, yet he hammered loudly on the panel.

"Don't break it down," she said as she opened it. "I was cleaning and I didn't hear the door." Her hair was tied up in a turban and her feet were bare. A lot of her was bare

since she was wearing just a pale green halter and shorts. She looked wonderful.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know," he said seriously.

"Well, it's not very important," she laughed, "don't look so sad." She leaned forward and gave him a quick, warm kiss on the mouth. Before he could react she had turned away and gone down the hall. The shorts were very short, and very, very round. As the door clicked behind him he realized suddenly that he was quite happy. The air was wonderfully cool.

"I'm almost finished," Shirl said, and there was the sudden whine of a small motor. "It'll just take me a second then I'll clean this mess away." When he came into the living room he saw that she was running a vacuum cleaner over the rug. "Why don't you take a shower?" she called over the sound of machine. "Mary O'Brien Haggerty will be getting the water bill so you shouldn't care."

A shower! he thought excitedly. "Since I've met Mary Haggerty I'll be glad to send her the bill," he shouted, and they both laughed.

As he went through the bedroom he remembered that this was the room where O'Brien had been shot—he hadn't thought about that at all last night. Poor O'Brien, he must have been a real bastard while he was still alive, since there didn't seem to be a single person who missed him or really felt moved by his death. Including Shirl. What had she thought about him? It didn't matter now. He dropped his clothes on the floor and tested the water with his hand.

There was a razor with a new blade in the cabinet and he hummed happily to himself while he washed the grey whiskers out of it, then lathered his face. For some reason wearing a dead man's shoes didn't bother him in the least. In fact he greatly enjoyed it. The razor slid smoothly over his skin.

All the cleaning apparatus had vanished by the time he had dressed and gone into the living room again, and Shirl had her hair down and what looked like fresh makeup on. Though she was still wearing the shorts and top, for which he breathed a silent thanks. He had never seen a prettier—no—a more beautiful girl in his whole life. He wished he could tell her that, but it wasn't the kind of thing he found it easy to say aloud.

"How about something cold to drink?" she asked.

"I'm supposed to be working—are you trying to corrupt me?"

"You can have a beer, I put some in the fridge. There are almost twenty bottles to finish and I don't really like it." She turned in the doorway and smiled. "Besides, you *are* working. You're interviewing me. Aren't I an important witness?"

The first sip of the cold beer cut a track of pleasure down his throat. Shirl sat down across from him and sipped at a cold kofee. "How is the case going, or is that an official secret?"

"Nothing secret, it goes slow like all cases. You shouldn't let the TV fool you, police work isn't at all like that. It's mostly dull stuff, a lot of walking around, making notes, writing reports—and hoping a stoolie will bring you the answer."

"I know what that is—a *stool pigeon*! There aren't really stool pigeons are there?"

"If there weren't we would be out of business. Most of our pinches are made on tips from stoolies. Most crooks are stupid and have big mouths and when they start talking there is usually someone around to listen. I hope someone talks this time—because it looks like a next to impossible case if they don't."

"What do you mean?"

He sipped some more beer: it was wonderful stuff. "There are over thirty-five million people in this town, and any one of them could have done it. I'll start running down all the former building employees and questioning them, and I'll try to find out where the tyre iron came from, but long before I'm finished the people on top are going to stop worrying about O'Brien and I'll be off the case and that will be that."

"You sound sort of bitter."

"You're right—I am. Wouldn't you be if you had a job you wanted to do, and liked doing, yet you were never allowed to do? We're over our heads with work and have been ever since I come onto the force. Nothing is ever finished, no cases are ever followed up, people really do get away with murder every day and no one seems to mind. Unless there is some kind of political reason, like with

Big Mike, and then no one really cares about him, it's just their own hides that they are worrying about."

"Couldn't they just hire some more policemen?"

"With what? There's no money in the city budget, almost all of it goes for Welfare. So our pay is low, cops take bribes, and—you don't want to hear a lecture about my troubles!" He drained the rest of the beer from the glass and she jumped to her feet.

"Here, let me get you another."

"No, thanks, not on an empty stomach."

"Haven't you eaten at all?"

"Grabbed a piece of weedcracker, I didn't have time for anything more."

"I'll fix us some lunch. How about beefsteak?"

"Shirl, stop it—you'll give me heart failure."

"No, I mean it. I bought a steak for Mike, the other morning of . . . that day. It's still in the freezer."

"I can't remember the last time I had beef—in fact it has been a long time since I have seen a piece of soylent." He stood and took both of her hands. "You're taking very good care of me, you know?"

"I like to," she said, and gave him another of those quick kisses. His hands were on the roundness of her hips when she turned and walked away.

She's a funny girl, he thought to himself, and touched his tongue to the trace of lipstick on his lips.

Shirl wanted to eat in the living room at the big table, but there was a table built into the kitchen, under the window, and Andy could see no reason why they couldn't sit right there. It was a steak all right, a monster piece of meat as big as his hand, and he felt the saliva flow in his mouth when she slid it onto his plate.

"Fifty—fifty," he said, slicing it in half and putting one piece on the other plate.

"I usually just fry some oatmeal in the juices . . ."

"We'll have that for dessert. This is the start of a new era, equal rights for men and women." She smiled at him and slid into her chair without another word. Damn, he thought, for another look like that I'd give her the whole thing.

There was seacress with it, weedcrackers to sop up the gravy, and another bottle of cold beer from which she al-

lowed him to pour her a small glass. The meat was indescribably good and he cut it into very small pieces, savouring each one slowly. He could not remember having eaten as well in his entire life. When he had finished he sat back and sighed with contentment. It was good, yet it was almost too good, and he knew it wouldn't last: he felt a little gnaw of irritation as the words *dead man's shoes* flicked through his mind.

"I hope you didn't mind, but I was more than a little drunk last night." It sounded crude and he was sorry the instant he had said it.

"I didn't mind at all. I thought you were very sweet."

"Sweet!" He laughed at himself. "I've been called a lot of things, but never that before. I thought you were angry at me ever since I came back."

"I've been busy, that's all, the place was a mess and you were hungry. I think I know what you need."

She moved swiftly around the table and was on his lap, the whole, womanly warm length of her and her arms were around his neck. It was a kiss, the kind he remembered, and he discovered that her halter was closed on the front by two buttons which he opened and pressed his face against the smooth fragrance of her skin.

"Let's go inside," she said huskily.

She lay next to him afterwards, relaxed and without shame, while his fingers traced the outline of her splendid body. The occasional sounds that pierced the sealed window and closed curtains only emphasized the twilight solitude of the bedroom. When he kissed the corner of her mouth she smiled dreamily, her eyes half closed.

"Shirl . . ." he said, but could not continue. He had no practice in voicing his emotions. The words were there, but he could not speak them aloud. Yet the way his hands moved on her skin conveyed his meaning more clearly than words could: her body trembled in response and she moved closer to him. There was a hoarseness in her voice, even though she whispered.

"You're really good in bed, different—do you know that? You make me feel things that I have never felt before." His muscles tightened suddenly and she turned to him.

"Are you angry at that? Should I make believe that you are the only man I ever slept with?"

"No, of course not. It's none of my business and doesn't affect me." The tautness of his body put the lie to his words.

Shirl rolled on her back and looked at the motes of dust glinting in the beam of light that came through the crack between the curtains. "I'm not trying to excuse anything, Andy, just to tell you. I grew up in one of those real strict families, I never went out or did anything and my father watched me all the time. I don't think I minded very much, there was just nothing to do, that's all. Dad liked me, he probably thought he was doing what was right for me. He was retired, they made him retire when he was fifty-five, and he had his pension and the money from the house, so he just sat around and drank. Then, when I was twenty, I entered this beauty contest and won first prize. I remember I gave my prize money to my father to take care of and that's the last time I saw him. There was one of the judges, he had asked me for a date that night, so I went out with him then I went to live with him."

Just like that? Andy thought to himself, but he didn't say it aloud. He smiled at himself: what rights did he have?

"You're not laughing at me?" she asked, touching her finger to his lips, a hurt in her voice.

"Good God, no! I was laughing at myself because—if you must know—I was being a little jealous. And I have no right to be."

"You have every right in the world," she said, kissing him slowly and lingeringly. "For me at least, this is very different. I haven't known that many men, and they were all men like Mike. I was just sort of there, I felt . . ."

"Shut up," he said. "I don't care." He meant it. "I just care about you here and now and not another thing in the world."

X

Andy was almost to the bottom of his list, and his feet hurt. Ninth Avenue simmered in the afternoon sun and every patch of shadow was filled with sprawled figures, old people, nursing mothers, teen-agers with their heads close together, laughing with their arms about one another.

People of all ages on every side, bare and dusty limbs projecting, scattered about like corpses in the aftermath of a battle. Only the children played in the sun, but they moved about slowly and their shouts were subdued. There was a fit of screaming and sudden movement as they eddied about two boys coming from the direction of the docks, whose arms were spotted with bites and streaks of uncongealed blood. On the end of a string they carried their prize, a large, grey, dead rat. They would eat well tonight. In the centre of the crowded street the tugtruck traffic moved at a snail's pace, the human draught animals leaning exhaustedly into their traces, mouths gaping for air. Andy pushed through between them, looking for the Western Union office.

It would be impossible to check every person who had gone in or out O'Brien's apartment during the previous week, but he had to at least try the most obvious leads. Any visitor to the building could have discovered the disconnected burglar alarm in the cellar, but only someone who had been in the apartment could have seen that this alarm had been cut off as well. There had been a short circuit, eight days before the murder, and the alarm on the door had been disconnected until it could be fixed. The killer, or some informant, could easily have seen this if he had been in the apartment. Andy had made a list of possibilities and was checking them out. They were all negative. No meter readers had visited the apartment, and all the deliveries had been made by men who had been coming there for years. Negative, all the way down the line.

Western Union was another long shot. There had been plenty of telegrams delivered to the building during that week, and the doorman was sure that some of them had been to O'Brien. He and the elevator boy had both remembered a telegram coming the night before the murder, it had been brought by a new messenger, a Chinese boy they had said. The chances were a thousand to one that it didn't mean anything—but it still had to be checked out. Any lead at all, no matter how slight would have to be investigated. Whatever happened it would at least be something to report to the lieutenant, to keep him off Andy's neck for a while. The yellow and blue sign hung out over the sidewalk and he turned in under it.

A long counter divided the office and at the far end of it was a bench on which three boys were sitting. A fourth boy stood at the counter talking to the dispatcher. None of them was Chinese. The boy at the counter took a message board from the man there and went out. Andy walked over, but before he could say anything the man shook his head angrily.

"Not here," he snapped. "Front counter for telegrams, can't you see I'm the dispatcher."

Andy looked at the sullen fatigue and the deep lines cut into the man's face by the perpetually pulled-down corners of his mouth, and at the clutter of boards and chalk and washable teltype tape on the desk before him, the peeling gold paint on the little sign that said *Mr. Burgger*. All the years of bitterness were clear to see in the clutter of the desk and the hatred in his eyes. It would take patience to get any co-operation from this man. Andy flashed his badge.

"Police business," he said. "You're the man I want to talk to, Mr. Burgger."

"I haven't done anything, there's nothing for you to talk to me about."

"No one's accusing you. It's information I need to aid an investigation."

"I can't help you. I don't have any police information."

"Let me decide that. Is Twenty-eighth Street inside your delivery area?"

Burgger hesitated, then nodded slowly and reluctantly as though he were being forced to reveal a state secret.

"Do you have any Chinese messenger boys?"

"No."

"But you have had at least one Chinese boy working for you?"

"No." He scratched on a board, ignoring Andy. Perspiration beaded the top of his bald head and collected in droplets on the strands of grey hair. Andy didn't enjoy putting on pressure, but he could do it when he had to.

"We have laws in this state, Burgger," he said in a low, toneless voice. "I can drag you out of here right now and take you over to the station and throw you into the can for thirty days for interfering with an officer. Do you want me to do that?"

"I haven't done anything!"

"Yes you have. You've lied to me. You said you never had a Chinese kid working here."

Burgger squirmed in his seat, pulled two ways by the conflict between his fear and his desire to remain uncommitted. Fear won.

"There was a Chinese kid, worked just one day, never came back."

"What day was that?"

The answer came reluctantly. "Monday of this week."

"Did he deliver any telegrams?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Because that's your job." Andy said, putting a snap into his words again. "What telegrams did he deliver?"

"He sat around all day, I didn't need him. It was his first day, I never send a new kid out the first day, let them get used to the bench first so they don't get ideas. But we had a rush that night, I had to use him. Just once."

"Where to?"

"Look mister, I can't remember every telegram I send out. This is a busy office and besides, we don't keep records. A telegram is received, delivered, accepted, that's the end of it."

"I know all that, but this telegram is important. I want you to try and remember where it went. Was it to Seventh Avenue? Or Twenty-third Street? Chelsea Park . . .?"

"Wait, I think that was it. I remember I didn't want the kid to go to Chelsea Park, they don't like new kids there, just the regulars, but there was no one else in, so I had to use him."

"Now we're getting some place," Andy said, taking out his note pad. "What's the kid's name?"

"Some chink name, I forget now. He was only here that one day and never came back."

"What did he look like, then?"

"Like a chink kid. It's not my job remembering what kids look like." He was sinking back into his sullen hatred.

"Where did he live?"

"Who knows? Kid comes in and puts up his board money, that's all I know. Not my job—"

"Nothing seems to be your job, Burgger. I'll be seeing

you again. Meanwhile try to remember what the kid looked like, I'll want some more answers from you."

The boys stirred on the bench when Andy went out and Burgger flashed them a look of pure hatred.

It was a thin lead, but Andy was cheerful; at least he had something to talk to Grassy about. Steve Kulozik was also in the lieutenant's office when he went in, and they nodded to each other.

"How's the case?" Steve asked.

"You can do your gossiping on your own time," Grassioli broke in: the tic in his eye was going fine today. "You better have come up with something by now, Rusch, this is a case not a holiday and a lot of brass up and down the line are getting peed off."

Andy explained about the disconnected burglar alarm and the timing necessary for anyone to have visited the apartment. He quickly ran through the unproductive interviews he had had until he came to the Western Union boy: this he told in detail.

"So what does it add up to?" the lieutenant asked, both hands clasped on his stomach, over the spot where the ulcer was.

"The kid might have been working for someone. Messenger boys have to put up ten D's board money—and how many kids have that kind of loot? The kid could have been brought in, maybe from Chinatown, and paid to snoop the apartments he brought telegrams to. He hit the jackpot first time out when he saw the disconnected alarm on Big Mike's door. Then, whoever hired him, pulled the job and the killing, after which they both faded."

"Sounds pretty slim, but it's about the only lead you've managed to come up with. What's the kid's name?"

"No one knows."

"Well, what the hell!" Grassioli shouted. "You come up with this fancy damned complicated theory and where does it go if you can't find the kid? There are millions of kids in this city—so how do we find the right one?"

Andy knew when to be silent. Steve Kulozik had been leaning his bulk against the wall, listening while Andy explained. "Could I say something, lieutenant?" he asked.

"What do you want?"

"Let's just for a minute think of this whole case as being

inside this precinct. The kid could have come from China: town or from anywhere, but let's forget about that. Say he came from Shiptown, right here, and you know how those people are about sticking together, so maybe there's another chink who was using the kid. Just suppose."

"What are you trying to say, Kulozik? Get to the god-damn point."

"I was just about to, lieutenant," Steve said imperturbably. "Let's say the kid or his boss comes from Shiptown. If they do we may have fingerprints on them. It was before my time, but you were here in seventy-two, weren't you lieutenant, when they brought all the Formosa refugees in after General Kung's invasion got its ass blown off on the mainland?"

"I was here. I was a rookie then."

"Didn't they fingerprint everybody, kids and all? Just in case some Commie agent slipped in with them before the airlift?"

"It's a long shot," the lieutenant said. "They were all fingerprinted and so were all the kids for a couple of years after that just in case they might defect. Those cards are all down in the cellar here. That's what you were thinking about, wasn't it?"

"That's right, sir. Go through them and see if the prints from the murder weapon can be matched up with one of the cards. It's a long shot, but it doesn't hurt to try."

"You heard him, Rusch," Grassioli said, pulling over a stack of reports. "Get the weapon prints and get down there and see if you can find anything."

"Yes, sir," Andy answered, and he and Steve went out together. "Big buddy you are," he told Steve as soon as the door had closed. "I should be knocking off soon and instead you got me buried in the cellar, and I'll probably be there all night."

"It's not that bad," Steve said complacently. "I had to use the file once, all the prints are coded so you can get to the ones you want fast. I'd help you except my brother-in-law is coming to dinner tonight."

"The one you hate so much?"

"That's the one. But he's working on one of the fishing trawlers now, and he's going to bring a fish he stole. Fresh fish. Doesn't your mouth water?"

"Just for a bite out of your hide, you ratfink. I hope you get a bone stuck in your throat."

The fingerprint files were not in quite the same condition that Steve had described. Others had used them since and whole groups of cards were filed out of sequence and one entire boxful had been spilled and afterwards had just been jammed back in at random. Though the basement was cooler than the rest of the building the air was filled with dust and felt almost too thick to breathe. Andy worked until nine o'clock before his head started to pound and his eyes burned. He went upstairs and put some water on his face and breathed in some fresh air. For a few moments he wavered between finishing the job or waiting until morning, but he had some idea of what Grassy would have to say about that, so he went back downstairs.

It was going on eleven o'clock when he found the card. He almost put it aside because the prints were so small, an infant's, then he realized that children grew up and had a closer look at it through the scratched, plastic magnifying lens.

There was no doubt at all. These prints were the same as the ones that had been found on the window and on the tyre iron.

"Chung, William," he read. "Born 1982, Shiptown Infirmary . . ."

He stood up so fast that he knocked the chair over. The lieutenant would be home by now, maybe in bed, and would be in a filthy humour if he were woken up. That didn't matter.

This was it.

XI

Far out in the river a boat whistle blew, two times, then two times again, and the sound echoed from the steel flanks of the ships until it had no source or direction and became a mournful wail that filled the hot night. Billy Chung rolled back and forth on his lumpy mattress, wide awake after hours of lying there staring into the darkness. Against the far wall the twins breathed hoarsely in their sleep. The whistle sounded again, beating at his ears. Why hadn't he just grabbed the stuff and got out of the apart-

ment? He could have done it faster. Why did the big bastard have to come in just then? It was right he should have been killed, anyone as stupid as that. It had been self-defence, hadn't it? He had been attacked first. The same memory repeated itself again like an endless circle of film in a projector; the iron bar swinging up, the look on the fat, red face. The sight of the iron sticking out of his head and the thin trickle of blood. Billy writhed, tossing his head from one side to the other, his fingers pulling at the damp skin on his chest.

Was every night going to be like this? With the heat and the sweat and the memories, over and over again? If he hadn't come into the bedroom just then . . . Billy groaned, then cut off the sound before it left his throat. He sat up and put his palms to his eyes, pressing hard until the jagged redness of their pressure filled the darkness before him. What about the dirt, should he use it now? He had bought it for a time like this, it had cost two D's, maybe now was the right time. They said you couldn't get hooked on it, but everybody lied.

Feeling his way in the darkness he ran his hand up the armoured cable on the steel wall to the disused junction box. The dirt was still there; his fingers pressed against the scrap of polythene it was wrapped in. Should he use it now? The whistle throbbed through the heat again and he found that he had dug his fingernails into the sides of his legs. His shorts were against the wall where he had thrown them and he pulled them on and reached down the little packet and went and opened the passageway door as quietly as he could. His bare feet were silent on the warm metal deck.

All of the portholes and windows were open, blind, black eyes in the rust-streaked walls. People were sleeping there, on all sides, in every cabin and compartment. Billy climbed to the top deck and the blind eyes still gaped at him. The last ladder led up to the bridge, once sealed and inviolate before two generations of children had patiently picked away at the covers and shattered the locks. Now the door was gone, the frames and glass long vanished from the windows. During the day this was a favourite playground for the swarming children of the *Columbia Victory*, but it was deserted and silent now, the only reminder of their

presence the sharp smell of urine in the corners. Billy went in.

Only the most solid of the nautical fittings remained: a steel chart table welded to one wall, the ship's telegraph, the steering wheel with half of its spokes missing. Billy carefully opened the packet of dirt on the chart table and poked his finger into the grey dust that was barely visible in the starlight. What did they call it? LSD? It was cut anyway, whatever it was, that's why they called it dirt. They mixed dirt or something with it to stretch it. You had to take all of it, dirt and all, to get enough LSD into you so you could feel it. He had watched Sam-Sam and some of the other Tigers sniff it, but he had never done it himself. How had they done it? He lifted the crumpled plastic and held it to his nose, sealing one nostril with his thumb, then inhaled strongly. The only sensation was an outrageous tickling and he pinched his nose shut tightly so he wouldn't sneeze all the stuff away. When the irritation died down he snuffed the remaining powder into his other nostril and threw the scrap of thin plastic to the floor.

There was no sensation, nothing at all, the world was the same and Billy knew that he had been cheated. Two D's shot, gone for nothing. He leaned out of the glassless, frameless window and tears mixed with the perspiration on his face. He cried and thought about that for a while and thought how glad he was it was dark and no one could see him crying, not him, eighteen years old. Under his fingers the rough metal of the window opening had the feel of miniature mountain peaks and valleys. Jagged, smooth, soft, hard. He leaned close and stroked with his fingertips and the pleasure of the touch sent shivers of love running the length of his spine. Why had he never noticed this before? Bending, he put out his tongue and the sweet-sour-iron-dirt taste was so wonderful, and when he let the sharp front edges of his teeth touch the metal it felt as though he had bitten off a piece of steel half as big as the bridge.

A ship's whistle filled the world with its sound, somewhere out on the river or close by, and he knew that it was more than a whistle it was music, high, low and all around him and he opened his mouth wide so that he could taste it better. Was it his ship that had sounded the whistle?

The dark outlines of spars, masts, wires, funnels, aerials, guys, stays, boats, moved on all sides of him, dancing black patterns against the other blackness of the sky. They were all sailing, of course, he had always known they would and this was the time. He signalled the engine room and grabbed the wheel—the wood of the handles so filling and round as tumescent organs, one for each hand!—turning and steering and sending the ship through the heaving forest of black skeletons.

And the crew worked too, good crew. He whispered orders to them because they were so good they could hear his orders even if he only thought them, not said them, and he wiped at his streaming nose. They were down below on the decks doing all the good things a good crew did while he guided the ship up here for all of them. They whispered as they toiled and two of them just below the bridge leaned together and he heard one ask “Everyone in position?” which was good to hear, and another said “Yes, sir.” which was good to hear and he could see some of his men moving on the decks and others at the gangplanks and others going below. In his hands the wheel felt strong and big and he kept it turning slowly back and forth guiding his ship through the other ships.

Lights. Voices. Below. People. On deck.

“He’s not in the apartment, lieutenant.”

“The bastard got away when he heard you coming.”

“Maybe, sir, but we had men at all the hatchways and stairs. And on the connections to the other ships. He must still be on board. His mother said he went to bed same time as everyone else.”

“Well find him. You got half the damned force to catch one kid. So catch him.”

“Yes, sir.”

Catch him. Catch who? Why, catch *him*, of course. He knew who the people were down there, police, and they wanted him. They had found him the way he knew they would. But he didn’t want to go with them. Not when he was feeling like this. Did the dirt make him feel like this? Wonderful dirt. He would have to get more dirt. He didn’t know a lot of things, he knew a lot of things, one thing he knew the cops didn’t have dirt or give you dirt. No dirt?

The handrail creaked and heavy feet clanged up the stair to the bridge. Billy climbed onto the steel table and out through the side window on the other side, reached up and grabbed and pulled himself up and out. It was easy. And it felt good too.

"What a stink," a voice said, then louder out of the window below. "He's not up here, lieutenant."

"Keep looking. Cover the ship, he has to be here somewhere."

The night air was warm enough and when he ran it felt solid enough to hold him up and he thought of walking over to the next ship, then he came to the funnel and this looked better. Bolted-on, curved steel rods rose up the side of the funnel making a ladder, and he climbed them.

"Did you hear something up there?"

One last rod and there was the top and the shouting black oval mouth of the smokestack black against the blackness beyond. He could go no further, except inside, and he waved his arm over the nothingness and his foot slipped and for an instant he tottered and began to swim down the long, black tunnel, then his hand struck against a bar inside: rough, rusted, coated with crumbling greasy darkness. Up and over he climbed until he half crouched on the bar and held the edge of the metal that formed the smokestack and looked up at the stars. He could notice them now that the voices were only a murmur far away like waves, and he had never seen stars like these before. Were there new stars? They were all, each one different colours, colours he couldn't remember ever having seen ever before.

His legs were cramped and his fingers stiff where they held the metal and he could no longer hear voices. At first he could not stand and he thought he might drop down the endless dark tunnel below him, and now it didn't seem as good an idea as it had seemed before. By forcing, he finally straightened his legs and crawled over the metal of the top and found the rungs that climbed the smoothness of the painted metal.

When you are born on the ships and live on the ships, they are as normal a world as streets, or any other. Billy knew that if you climbed out to the tip of the bow and hung and jumped you could land on the stern of the next ship along. And there were other ways of getting from ship

to ship that avoided the gangways and walkways and he used them, even in the dark, without conscious thought, working his way towards shore. He was almost there when he became aware of the pain in his bare feet where he had walked along a rusted steel hawser and filled the soles with the sharp, rusty needles of wire ends. He sat and tried to get some of them out by touch. While he was sitting there, leaning against the rail, he began to shiver.

Memory was clear. He knew what he had heard and done, but only now was the true import beginning to penetrate. The police had found him and tracked him down, and it was only an accident that he had been topside and avoided them.

They were looking for him and they knew who he was!

The sky was grey behind the dark silhouette of the city when he reached the waterfront, far uptown towards the end of the row of ships. There seemed to be people near Twenty-third Street, but it was too dark to be sure.

He jumped to the dock and ran towards the row of sheds, a small, soot-smeared figure, bare-footed and afraid. The shadows swallowed him up.

XII

The heat wave had gripped the city for such a long time that it was not mentioned any more, just endured. When Andy rode up in the elevator the operator, a thin, tired looking boy, leaned against the wall with his mouth open, sweating into his already sodden uniform. It was just a few minutes past seven in the morning when Andy opened the door of apartment 41-E. When the outer door had closed behind him he knocked on the inner one, then made an exaggerated bow in the direction of the TV pickup. The lock rattled open and Shirl stood in the doorway, her hair still tangled from the bed, wearing only a sheer peignoir.

"It's been days—" she said and came willingly into his arms while he kissed her. He forgot the plastic bundle under his arm and it dropped to the floor. "What's that?" she asked, drawing him inside.

"Raincoat, I have to take it on duty in an hour, it's supposed to rain today."

"You can't stay now?"

"Don't I wish I could!" He kissed her soundly again and groaned, only half in humour. "A lot has been happening since I saw you last."

"I'll make some kofee, that won't take long. Come and tell me in the kitchen."

Andy sat and looked out of the window while she put the water up. Dark clouds filled the sky from horizon to horizon, so heavy that they seemed to be just above the rooftops of the buildings. "You can't feel it here in the apartment," he said, "but it's even worse out today. The humidity I guess, it must be up around ninety-nine."

"Have you found the Chung boy?" she asked.

"No. He might be at the bottom of the river for all we know. It's been over two weeks since he got away from us on the ship, and we haven't found a trace of him since. We even got a paper priority and had identikit pictures printed with his fingerprints and description, then sent them around to all the precincts. I brought copies to Chinatown and all the nearby ones myself, and talked to the detectives there. At first we had a stakeout on the kid's apartment, but we pulled that off and instead have a couple of stoolies who live on the ship—they'll keep their eyes open and let us know if he shows, they're not paid unless they see him. That's about all we can do now."

"Do you think you'll catch him?"

Andy shrugged and blew on the cup of kofee she handed him. "There's no way to tell. If he can stay out of trouble, or get out of town, we'll never see him again. It'll just be a matter of luck now, one way or the other. I wish we could convince City Hall of that."

"Then—you're still on the case?"

"Half and half, worse luck. The pressure is still on to find the kid but Grassy managed to convince them that I could do just as well part time, running down whatever leads there are, and they agreed. So I'm supposed to be half time on this case and half time on squad duty. Which, if you know Grassy, means I'm full time on squad duty and the rest of the time I'm looking for Billy Chung. I'm getting to hate that kid. I wish he had been drowned and I could prove it."

Shirl sat down across from him and sipped her kofee. "So that's where you have been the past days."

"That's where I've been. On duty and up at Kensico Reservoir for two days, with no time to stop by here or even send you a message. I'm on day duty now and have to sign in by eight, but I had to see you first. Today's the thirtieth. What are you going to do, Shirl?"

She just shook her head in silence and stared down at the table, the look of unhappiness sweeping across her face as soon as he had spoken. He reached over and took her hand but she did not notice, nor did she try to pull it away.

"I don't like talking about it either," he said. "These past weeks have been, wel . . ." He switched the subject, he could not express all that he felt, not at this time, so suddenly, "Has O'Brien's sister bothered you again?"

"She came back, but they wouldn't let her in the building. I said I didn't want to see her, and she caused a scene. Tab told me all the building staff enjoyed it very much. She wrote a note, said she would be here tomorrow since it is the last day of the month, to take everything away. I guess she can do that. Wednesday is the first, so the lease is up at midnight."

"Do you have any plans about where . . . what you are going to go?" It sounded stiff and unnatural the way he said it, but could not do any better.

Shirl hesitated, then shook her head no. "I haven't been thinking about it at all," she said. "With you here it was like a holiday and I just kept putting off worrying about it from one day to the next."

"It was a holiday, all right! I hope we didn't leave any beer or liquor for the Dragon Lady?"

"Not a spoonful!"

They laughed together. "We must have drunk a fortune in booze," Andy said. "But I don't regret a drop of it. What about the food?"

"Just some weedcrackers left—plus enough other things to make one big meal. I have tilapia in the freezer. I was hoping that we could eat it together, sort of a finishing-off party or a house-cooling party, instead of a housewarming party."

"I can do it if you don't mind eating late. It could even be midnight."

"That's fine by me, it might be more fun that way."

When Shirl was happy every inch of her showed it. He

had to smile when she did. New highlights seemed to glisten in her hair and it was as though happiness were a substance that flowed through her and radiated in all directions. Andy felt it and was buoyed up by it, and he knew if he didn't ask her now he never would be able to.

"Listen, Shirl," he took both her hands in his and the warmth of her touch helped a good deal. "Will you come with me? You can stay at my place. There's not much room, but I'm not home much to get in the way. It's all yours for as long as you like." She started to say something but he hushed her with his finger to her lips. "Wait a second before you answer. There are no strings attached. This is temporary—for as long as you want it. It's nothing like Chelsea Park, just a crummy walk-up, half a single room, and . . ."

"Will you be quiet!" she laughed. "I've been trying to say yes for hours now and you seem to be trying to talk me out of it."

"What . . . ?"

"I don't want anything in this world except to be happy, and I've been happier these weeks with you than I ever was at any time in my life before. And you can't frighten me with your apartment, you should see where my father lives, and I was there until I was nineteen."

Andy managed to get around the table without knocking it over and he was hugging her to him. "And I have to be in the precinct in fifteen minutes," he complained. "But wait for me here, it could be any time after six, but it's sure to be late. We'll have the party, and afterwards we'll move your stuff. Do you have very much?"

"It'll all fit in three suitcases."

"Perfect. We'll carry it, or we can use a cab. I have to get going." His voice changed, became almost a whisper. "Give me a kiss." She did, warmly, sharing his feelings.

It took a heroic effort to leave, and before he went he ran through all the possible excuses he might have for being late, but he knew that none of them would satisfy the lieutenant. When he came into the lobby he was aware for the first time of a thundering, drumming noise and saw the doorman, Tab, and four of the guards crowded around the front door, looking out. They made way for him when he came over.

"Now just look at that," Charlie said. "That should change things."

The far side of the street was almost invisible, cut off by a falling curtain of water. It poured down on the roofs and sidewalks, and the gutters were already filled with a rushing, debris-laden torrent. Adults huddled in the doorways and halls for protection, but the children saw this as a holiday and were running and screaming, sitting on the kerb and kicking their legs in the filthy stream.

"Soon as the storm sewers block up that water'll be a couple of feet deep. Drown a few of those kids," Charlie said.

"Happens every time," Newton, the building guard agreed, nodding with morbid satisfaction. "The little ones get knocked down and no one even knows about it until after the rain."

"Could I see you a moment, please?" Tab said, tapping Andy on the arm and walking off to one side. Andy followed him, shrugging into the sticking folds of his rain-coat.

"Tomorrow's the thirty-first," Tab said. He reached out and held the coat while Andy struggled his hand into the sealed-together arm of the coat.

"I guess you'll be looking for another job then," Andy said, thinking about Shirl and the hammering rain outside.

"That's not what I meant," Tab said, turning away as he talked to look out of the window. "It's Shirl, she'll be leaving the apartment tomorrow, she'll have to. I heard that the old bat sister of Mr. O'Brien's has hired a tugtruck, she's moving all the furniture out first thing in the morning. I wish I knew what Shirl was going to do." His arms were folded across his chest and he brooded out at the falling rain with the solidity of a carved statue.

It's none of his business, Andy thought. But he has known her a lot longer than I have.

"Are you married, Tab?" he asked.

Tab glanced at him out of the corners of his eyes and snorted. "Married man, happily married and three kids and I wouldn't change if you offered me one of those TV queens with the knockers big as fire hydrants." He looked closely at Andy, then smiled. "Nothing there for you to

worry about. I just like the kid. She's just a nice kid; that's all. I'm worried what's going to happen to her."

There's no secret, Andy thought, realizing this wasn't the first time the question would be asked. "She's going to be staying with me," he said. "I'm coming over later tonight to help her move." He glanced at Tab who nodded seriously.

"That's very good news. I'm glad to hear that. I hope things work out okay, I really do."

He turned back to look at the rain and Andy looked at his watch and saw that it was almost eight and hurried out. The air was cool, cooler than the lobby, the temperature must have dropped ten degrees since the rain began. Maybe this was the end of the heat wave; it had certainly lasted long enough. There was already a few inches of water in the moat and its surface was dimpled and ringed by the falling drops. Before he had crossed the drawbridge to the street he felt the water run into his shoes: his pants legs were sopping and his wet hair was plastered to his head. But it was cool and he didn't mind, and even the thought of the perpetually-annoyed Grassioli didn't seem to bother him too much.

It rained the rest of the day which, in every other way, was like any other day. Grassioli chewed him out twice personally, and included him in a general berating of the entire squad. He investigated two holdups, and another that was combined with felonious assault that would soon be changed to manslaughter or murder, since the victim was rapidly dying from a knife wound in his chest. There was more work piled up than the squad could get through in a month, and new cases coming in all the time while they plodded away at the backlog. As he had expected he didn't leave at six, but a phone call took the lieutenant away at nine o'clock and all of the day squad still on duty—in spite of Grassioli's parting threats and warnings—had vanished ten minutes later. The rain was still falling, though not as heavily as before, and the air felt cool after the weeks of continuous heat. As he walked along Seventh Avenue, Andy realized that the streets were almost empty, for the first time this summer. A few people were out in the rain and there were dark forms huddled in every doorway, but the sidewalks and streets were strangely vacant.

Climbing the stairs in his building was worse than usual, the people who normally crowded the stoop and kerb were sitting here, some of them even lying asleep across the steps. He pushed by them and stepped over the recumbent ones, ignoring their mumbled curses. This was an indication of what it would be like in the fall unless the building owner hired bodyguards to drive the squatters out. It was scarcely worth it any more, there were so many of them, and they just came right back when the guards left.

"You'll ruin your eyes looking at that thing all the time," he told Sol when he came in. The old man lay on the bed propped up by pillows, watching a war film on TV. Cannon fire thundered scratchily away from the speaker.

"My eyes were ruined before you were born, Mr. Wiscguy, and I can still see better than ninety-nine per cent the fogies my age. Still working union hours, I see."

"Find me a better job and I'll quit," Andy said, turning on the light in his room and digging through the bottom drawer. Sol came in and sat on the edge of the bed.

"If you're looking for your flashlight," he said, "you left it on the table the other day. I meant to tell you, I put it in your top drawer there, under the shirts."

"You're better than a mother to me."

"Yeah, well don't try to borrow no money, son."

Andy put the flash in his pocket and knew that he would have to tell Sol now. He had been putting it off and he wondered why it bothered him. After all, this room was all his, they shared food rations and meals because it made things easier, that was all. It was just a working arrangement.

"I've got someone coming to stay with me for a while, Sol. I'm not sure how long."

"It's your room, buddy-boy. Do I know the guy?"

"Not exactly. Anyway it's not a guy——"

"Hoo-ha! That explains it all." He snapped his fingers. "Not the chick, Big Mike's girl, the one you been seeing?"

"Yes, that's the girl. Her name's Shirl."

"A fancy name, a fancy girl," Sol said, heaving to his feet and going towards the door. "Very fancy. Watch out you don't get your fingers burned, buddy-boy."

Andy started to say something but Sol was out of the room and closing the door behind himself. A little harder

than necessary. He was looking at the TV again when Andy left and did not glance away from it or say anything.

It had been a long day and Andy's feet hurt and his neck hurt and his eyes burned: he wondered why Sol was being sore. He had never met Shirl—so what did he have to complain about? Tramping crosstown through the slowly falling rain he thought about Shirl and, without realizing it, began to whistle. He was hungry and he was tired and he wanted to see her very much. The turrets and spires of Chelsea Park rose before him through the rain and the doorman nodded and touched his cap to Andy as he hurried across the drawbridge.

Shirl opened the door for him and she was wearing the silver dress, the same one that she had been wearing that first night, with a tiny white apron tied over it. There was a silver clip holding her copper hair in place and a matching silver bracelet on her right arm, and rings on both her hands.

"Don't get me wet," she said, leaning over to kiss him. "I've got all my good things on for the party."

"And I look like a bum," he said, peeling off the dripping raincoat.

"Nonsense. You look like you've had a hard day in the office or whatever you call that place where you work. You need a party. Hang that thing in the shower and dry your hair before you catch a cold, then come into the living room. I have a surprise."

"What is it?" he called after her receding back.

"If I told you it wouldn't be a surprise," she said with devastating female logic.

Shirl had the apron off and was waiting for him in the living room, standing proudly by the dining table. Two, tall candles reflected highlights from the silverware, china plates and crystal glasses. A white tablecloth hung in thick folds. "And that's not all," Shirl said pointing to the end table where the neck of a bottle projected from a silver bucket.

Andy saw that the bottle had wires over the top and around the neck, and that the bucket was full of ice cubes and water. He took out the bottle and held the label to the light so that he could read it aloud.

"Frenchwine Champagne—a rare, selected, effervescent

beverage of great vintage. Artificially coloured, flavoured, sweetened and carbonated." He placed it carefully back into the bucket. "We used to have wine in California when I was a kid and my father let me taste it, but I don't remember it at all. You're going to spoil me, Shirl, with this kind of stuff. And you were kidding me—you said that we had finished all the drink in the house—and all the time you had this tucked away."

"I did not! I bought that today, special for this party. Mike's liquor man came around, he's from Jersey and didn't even know what had happened to Mike."

"It must have cost a fortune—"

"Not as bad as you think. I sold him back all the empty bottles and he gave me a special price. Now open it, for goodness sake, and let's try it."

Andy wrestled with the wire over the cork. He had seen them open bottles like this on TV, but it looked a lot easier than it really was. He worked it off finally and there was a satisfactory bang that shot the cork across the room, while Shirl caught the foaming wine in the glass that she held ready, just as the liquor man had instructed her.

"Here's to us," she said, and they raised their glasses.

"This is very good, I've never tasted anything like it before."

"You've never tasted anything like this dinner before, either," she said and hurried to the kitchen. "Now sit down and sip your wine and look at TV, it'll only be a few minutes more."

The first course was lentil soup, but with a richer and better flavour than usual. Meat stock, Shirl explained, she had saved it from the steak. There was a white sauce on the broiled tilapia, which were scattered with green flecks of cress and served with dumplings of weeder cracker meal and a seacress salad. The wine went with everything and Andy was sighing with contentment and a pleasurable sense of unaccustomed fullness when Shirl brought in kofee and dessert, a flavoured agar-agar gelatine with soymilk on it. He groaned, but he had no trouble eating it.

"Do you smoke tobacco?" she asked as she cleared the table.

He leaned back in the chair, eyes half-closed and utterly relaxed. "Not on a cop's salary, I don't. Shirl, you are an

absolute genius in the kitchen. I'll be spoiled if I eat too much of your cooking."

"Men should be spoiled, it makes them easier to live with. It's too bad you don't smoke, because I found two cigars left in a box that Mike had hidden away, he saved them for special guests."

"Take them to the flea market, you'll get a good price."

"No, I couldn't do that, it doesn't seem right."

Andy sat up. "If you want to do something, I know that Sol used to smoke, he's the guy I told you about, who lives in the adjoining room. It might cheer him up. He's a pretty good friend of mine."

"That's a wonderful idea," she said, sensing the edge of concern in Andy's words. Whoever this Sol was she wanted him to like her, living right in the next room like that. "I'll put them into my suitcase." She carried the loaded tray into the kitchen.

When the dishes were cleaned she went to finish her packing in the bedroom, and called Andy in to help her get the last case down from the top shelf. She had to change for the street and he helped her with the zipper on her dress and this had just the effect she hoped it would have.

It was after midnight when the last bag was packed and she had put on her grey street dress and was ready to leave.

"Did you forget anything?" Andy asked.

"I don't think so, but I'll have a last look around."

"Shirl, when you came here, moved in, I mean, did you bring any towels or bed linen or anything like that with you?" he pointed towards the rumpled bed and seemed uncomfortable about something.

"No, nothing like that, I just had a bag with some clothes in it."

"I was just hoping that you owned some of these sheets. You see—well, I only have one, and it's getting old, and they cost a fortune these days, even used ones."

She laughed. "You sound like you're planning to spend a lot of time in bed. Now that you remind me, I remember, two of these sheets are mine." She opened her bag and began to swiftly fold and pack them away. "He owed at least this much."

Andy carried the suitcases into the hall and rang for

the elevator. Shirl stood for a moment, watching as the apartment door closed, then hurried after him.

"Doesn't he ever sleep?" Andy asked as they crossed the lobby towards Charlie who stood at his post by the front door.

"I'm not sure," Shirl said. "He always seems to be around when something is happening."

"Hate to see you leaving, Miss Greene," Charlie said as they came up. "I can take the keys to the apartment now, if you want me to."

"You better give her a receipt," Andy said, as she handed the keys over.

"Be happy to," Charlie said imperturbably, "if I had anything to write on."

"Here, put it in my notepad," Andy said. He looked over the doorman's shoulder and saw Tab coming out of the guardroom.

"Tab—what are you doing here at this time of night?" Shirl asked.

"Waiting for you. I heard you were leaving and I thought I'd give you a hand with your bags."

"But, it's so late."

"Last day of the job. Got to finish it off right. And you don't want to be seen walking around this time of the night with suitcases. Plenty of people will cut your throat for less." He picked up two of the bags and Andy took the third.

"Hope someone does bother me," she said. "A high priced bodyguard and a city detective—just to walk me a couple of blocks."

"We'd wipe the street with them," Andy said, taking back his notebook and leading the way through the door Charlie held open.

When they went out the rain had stopped and stars could be seen through holes in the clouds. It was wonderfully cool. She took each of the men by an arm and led the way down the street, out of the pool of light in front of Chelsea Park and into the darkness.

It had been strange climbing the stairway in the dark, sweeping the light over the sleeping figures on the stairs while Andy carried the bags up behind her. His friend, Sol, had been asleep, and they had gone quietly through his

room into Andy's. The bed was just big enough for both of them and she had been tired and curled up with her head on his shoulder and slept so soundly that she didn't even know it when he had got up, dressed and left. She awoke to see the sun streaming through the window onto the foot of the bed and, when she kneeled with her elbows on the window sill, she smelt the clean, fresh-washed air; the only time the city was ever like this was after a rain-storm. With all the dust and soot washed away it was wonderfully clear, and she could see the sharp-edged buildings of Bellevue rising above the lower jumble of tar-black roofs and stained brick walls. And the heat was gone, vanished with the rain, that was the best part. She yawned luxuriously and turned back to look at the room.

Just what you would expect from a bachelor, neat enough—but as empty of charm as an old shoe. There was a thin patina of dust on everything, but that was probably her fault since Andy certainly had not been spending much time here of late. If she could get some paint somewhere, a coat of it wouldn't do that dresser any harm. It couldn't have been more gouged and nicked if it had been in a landslide. At least there was a full length mirror, cracked but still good, and a wardrobe to hang her things in. There was nothing to complain about, really, a little brightening up and the room would be nice. And get rid of those million spider webs on the ceiling.

A water tank with a tap was on the partition wall next to the door, and when she turned it on a thin, brownish stream tinkled into the basin that was fixed on brackets beneath it. It had the sharp, chemical smell that she had almost forgotten, since all the water in Chelsea Park was run through expensive filters. There didn't seem to be any soap here but she splashed water onto her face and rinsed her hands, and was drying them on the tattered towel that hung next to the tank when a clanking, squealing sound came through the partition in front of her. She couldn't imagine what it possibly could be, though it was obviously coming from the room next door where Sol lived. Something of his was making the noise, and it hadn't started until after he heard her moving around and running the water, which was nice of him. It also meant that, as far as sound went, this room had as much privacy as a bird

cage. Well, that couldn't be helped. She brushed her hair, put on the same dress she had worn the night before, then added just a touch of makeup. When she was ready she took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Good morning—" she said, and could think of nothing else to say, but just stood there in the doorway, trying not to gape. Sol was sitting on a wheelless bicycle, going nowhere—but going at a tremendous rate, his grey hair flying in all directions and his beard bobbing up and down on his chest as he pedalled. His single garment was a pair of ancient and much-patched shorts. The squealing sound came from a black object at the rear of the bicycle. "Good morning!" she called again, louder this time, and he glanced up at her and his peddling slowed to a stop. "I'm Shirl Greene," she said.

"And who else could you be," Sol said coldly, climbing down from the bike and wiping the sweat from his face with his forearm.

"I've never seen a bicycle like that before. Does it do something?" She wasn't going to fight with him, no matter how much he wanted to.

"Yeah. It makes ice." He went to put his shirt on.

At first she thought it was one of these deep jokes, the kind she never understood, then she saw that wires led from the black, motor-like thing behind the bike to a lot of big batteries on top of the refrigerator.

"I know," she said, happy at her discovery, "you're making the fridge go with the bike. I think that's wonderful." His only answer was a grunt this time, no remarks so she knew she was making headway. "Do you like kofee?"

"I wouldn't know. It's been so long since I tasted any."

"I've got a half a can in my bag. If we had some hot water we could make some." She didn't wait for an answer, but went into the other room and got the can. He looked at the brown container for a moment, then shrugged and went to fill a pot with water.

"I bet it tastes like poison," he said as he put the pot on the stove. First he turned on the hanging light in the middle of the room and studied the glowing filament in the bulb, then nodded begrudgingly. "Just for a change we got some juice today, so let's hope it lasts long enough to boil

a half inch of water." He switched on the electric heating element of the stove.

"I've only been drinking koffee the last couple of years," Shirl said, sitting in the chair by the window. "They tell me it doesn't taste a thing like real coffee, but I wouldn't know."

"I can tell you. It don't."

"Have you ever tasted *real* coffee? More than once?" She had never met a man yet who didn't enjoy telling about his experiences.

"Taste it? Honeybunch, I used to live on it. You're a kid, you've got no idea how things used to be in the old days. You drank a pot of coffee and never even thought about it, and in the army they used to make it by the gallon. And to think we complained because the joe was so bad. In fact, in the army, I was on KP once—you know what that is?"

"I remember from the army pictures on TV. That's like MP isn't it?"

"Yeh, it's like it. They're both in the same army. TV, what a way to get an education." He frowned sternly at the set above the table. "KP is kitchen police. They drag you out of bed at three-thirty in the morning and work you for seventeen hours or more in the mess hall. It was great. Anyway on KP once I had to unload a trailer truck—and do you know what I had to carry—?"

"No . . . what?" Shirl was wide-eyed and attentive, a born listener.

"Coffee beans, that's what." The water boiled and he turned off the stove and poured the hot water over the koffee powder in their cups. "Coffee beans in one-hundred pound sacks. Boy, what if I had one of those now! What if I had gyped one of those bags and steamed out an oil drum and welded the bag inside the drum and sunk the whole thing in cement right out there in the Texas desert? I could go back there now and dig it out and be a rich man. Do you know how much a pound of coffee costs, if you could find it to buy?"

She shook her head no.

"At least two hundred D's, that's what. And two hundred times a hundred gives—let me think—twenty thousand dollars. How about that?"

Shirl could only shake her head in admiration, then sipped at the kofee. It was still too hot. "I just remembered," she said, jumping up from the chair and going into the other room. She was back in a moment and gave the two cigars to Sol. "Andy said I should give these to you, that you used to smoke them."

Sol's air of masculine superiority fell away and he almost gaped. "Cigars?" was all he could say.

"Yes, Mike had a box of them, but there were just these two left. I don't know if they are any good or not?"

Sol groped for memory of the cigar ritual that had once controlled a judgment of this kind. He sniffed suspiciously at the end of one. "Smells like tobacco at least." When he held it to his ear and pinched the smaller end there was a decided crackling sound. "Aha! Too dry. I might have known. You got to take care of cigars, keep them in the right climate. These are all dried out. They should have been in a humidor. They can't be smoked this way."

"Do you mean they're no good? We'll have to throw them away?" It was a terrible thought.

"Nothing like that, relax. I'll just take a box, put a wet sponge in it along with these stogies and wait three, four days. One thing about cigars, if they dry out you can bring them back to life just like Lazarus, or better maybe, he couldn't have been smelling too good after being buried four days. I'll show you how to take care of these."

Shirl sipped her kofee and smiled. It was going to be all right. Sol just hadn't liked the idea of someone coming to stay with Andy, it must have upset him. But he was a nice guy and had some funny stories and a funny, sort of old-fashioned way of talking, and she knew that they were going to get along.

"This stuff doesn't taste too bad," Sol said, "if you can forget what real coffee tastes like. Or Virginia ham, or roast beef, or turkey. Boy, could I tell you about turkey. It was during the war and I was stationed at the ass-end of Texas and all the food was sent out of St. Louis and we were right on the end of the supply line. What reached us was so bad I saw mess sergeants shudder when they opened the GI cans the stuff was shipped in. But once, just once, it worked the other way round. These Texans raise billions

of turkeys down there on ranches, then ship them north for Christmas and Thanksgiving, you know." She nodded, but she didn't know. "Well, the war was on and there was no way to ship all these turkeys out, so the air corps bought them for next to nothing and that's what we had to eat for about a month. I tell you! We had roast turkey, fried turkey, turkey soup, turkey-burgers, turkey-hash, turkey-croquettes . . ."

There was the sound of running footsteps in the hall and someone rattled the knob so loudly that the door shook. Sol quietly slipped open the table drawer and took out a large meat cleaver.

"Sol, are you there?" Andy called from the hall, shaking the handle again. "Open up."

Sol threw the cleaver onto the table and hurried over to unlock the door. Andy pushed in, sweating and breathing hard, closing the door behind him and talking in a low voice despite his urgency.

"Listen, fill the water tanks and all the jerrycans. And fill whatever else we have that will hold water. Maybe you can plug the sink, then you can put water in that too. Fill as many jerrycans as you can at our water point, but if they begin to notice you coming back too often, go to the other one on Twenty-eighth Street. But get going. Sol—Shirl will help you?"

"What's it all about?"

"Christ, don't ask questions, just do it! I shouldn't be telling you this much—and don't let on I did or we'll all be in trouble. I have to get back before they find me missing." He went out as fast as he came in, the slammed door an echo to his receding footsteps.

"What was all that about?" Shirl asked.

"We'll find out later," Sol said, kicking into his sandals. "Right now we get moving. This is the first time Andy has ever pulled anything like this and I'm an old man—I scare easy. There's another jerrycan in your room."

They were the only ones who appeared concerned in any way and Shirl wondered what Andy could have possibly meant. There were only two women waiting on line at the corner waterpoint, and one of them only wanted to fill a

quart bottle. Sol helped to carry the filled jerrycans, but Shirl insisted on taking them up the stairs. "Work some of the fat off my hips," she said. "I'll bring down the empties and you can get back on line while I pour out the others."

The line was a little longer now, but there was nothing unusual about it, this was the time when most people started to show up to make sure they had their water before the point closed at noon.

"You must be thirsty, Pop," the patrolman on duty said when they reached the head of the line again. "Ain't you been around before?"

"So what's your trouble?" Sol snapped, pointing his beard at the cop. "All of a sudden you're being paid to count the house? Maybe I like to take a bath once in awhile so I don't stink like some people I could mention, but I won't . . ."

"Take it easy, grandpa."

" . . . I'm not your grandpa, shmok, since I haven't committed suicide yet, which I would if I was. All of a sudden cops got to count how much water people need?"

The policeman retreated a yard and half-turned his back. Sol filled the containers, still grumbling, and Shirl helped carry them to one side to screw the lids back on. They had just finished when a police sergeant pulled up on a sputtering motorbike.

"Lock this point up," he said. "It's closed for the day."

The women who were waiting to fill their containers screamed at him and pushed forward around the spigot, getting in each others way and trying to get some water before it was closed down. The patrolman fought his way through the shouting crowd to turn the valve handle. Even before he touched it the water hiccupped, died to a thin trickle, then stopped. He glanced at the sergeant.

"Yeah, that's the trouble," the sergeant said. "There's a . . . broken pipe, they had to shut down. It'll be all right tomorrow. Now break this up."

Sol looked wordlessly at Shirl as they picked up the jerrycans, then turned away. Neither of them has missed the hesitancy in the sergeant's voice. This was something more than a broken pipe. They carried the containers slowly up the stairs, careful not to spill a drop.

XIV

Even though the cops knew who he was and were after him, luck was on his side, that's what Billy Chung kept telling himself. Sometimes he would forget it for a while and the shakes would come back and he would have to start thinking all about the luck again. Hadn't the cops come when he was out of the apartment—wasn't that luck? And he had gotten away without being seen, that was luck, too. What if he had to leave everything behind? He had put his shorts on, and just the day before he had sewed all his money into them because he was afraid of losing it out of his shoe. So he had the loot, and loot was all you really needed. He had run, but he had run smart, going to the flea market in Madison Square first and waking up one of the guys who slept under his stall and buying sandals. Then he headed downtown, out of the district, keeping moving. When the water points opened he had washed up, then bought an old shirt from another stall, and some weederackers, and ate them while he walked. It was still early when he got to Chinatown, but the streets were already filling up, and all he had to do was find a clear spot against a wall, curl up and go to sleep.

When he woke up he knew that he couldn't stay here, this would be the first place that the cops would try, he had to move on. Some of the locals who lived in the streets were already beginning to give him funny looks and he knew if his description was out they'd finger him in a minute for a couple of D's. He had heard once that there were some Chinese over on the East Side and he headed that way. If he stayed anywhere too long he would be noticed, and as long as it was this hot it didn't matter where he slept. It hadn't been a conscious plan in the beginning but in a few days he discovered that if he moved around while the streets were crowded no one paid any attention to him, and he could even sleep during the day, and some at night too if he could find a quiet spot. No one ever noticed him as long as he stopped someplace where there were other Chinese in the area. He kept moving and it kept him busy; this way he didn't

worry too much about what was going to happen to him. It would be all right as long as his money lasted. And then—he didn't like to think about what would happen then, so he didn't.

It was the rainstorm that made him decide that he had to find a place to hole up. He had been caught out in it and got soaked and at first it wasn't bad at all, but just at first. Along with thousands more of the homeless he had sought shelter under the high, soaring roadways of the Williamsburg Bridge, and even here it wasn't very dry with every change in the wind blowing in sheets of rain. He was wet and cold the whole night, he didn't sleep at all, and in the morning he climbed the stairway to the bridge to get into the sun. Ahead of him the walkway stretched out over the river and he walked along it to keep warm, into the face of the rising sun. He had never been this high before and it was completely new, looking down on the river and the city like this. A grey, nuclear freighter was moving slowly upstream and all the rush of sail and rowboat traffic scurried away before it. When he looked down he had to hold tight to the railing.

Halfway across he realized that he was out of Manhattan—for the first time in his life—and all he had to do was keep going and the police would never find him. Brooklyn lay ahead him, a jagged wall of strange outlines against the sky, a wholly new and frightening place. He didn't know anything about it—but he could find out. The police would never think of looking for him this far away, never in a hundred years.

Once he was off the bridge the fear ebbed slowly away—this was just like Manhattan only with different people, different streets. His clothes were dry now and he felt all right, except that he was tired and very sleepy. The streets went on and on, crowded and noisy with people, and he followed them at random until he came to a high wall that stretched all along one side of the road and seemed to be endless. He followed it, wondering what was on the other side, until he reached a sealed, iron gate with rusty barbed wire strung over the top of it so you couldn't climb over. BROOKLYN NAVY YARD—KEEP OUT a weathered sign read. Through the bars of the gate Billy could see a wasteland of sealed buildings, empty sheds,

rusting mountains of scrap, pieces of ships, broken hills of concrete and rubble. A potbellied guard in a grey uniform walked by inside, he carried a heavy night stick, almost a club, and he looked suspiciously at Billy who let go of the gate and walked on.

Now that was something. Looked like a hundred miles of land in there and no people at all, closed up and forgotten. If he could get in there without the cop seeing him he could hide forever in a place like that. If there was a way to get in. He kept walking along the wall, until the solid stone and concrete gave way to a chain link fence, rusty and drooping. More barbed wire topped it, but it was clumped rustily together and torn away in spots. This was a piece of street where there weren't too many people, either, just blank walls of old warehouses. It wouldn't be hard getting over the fence here.

That he wasn't the first person with this kind of idea was proven a minute later, while he was studying the fence. There was a stirring of motion on the other side and a man, not much older than he was, ran into sight. He stopped a minute, looking up and down the street outside to be sure no one was too close, then bent to the bottom of the wire fence, and pushed a jagged boulder of broken concrete under it. Then, in a practised, wriggling motion, he crawled under the fence, pushed away the supporting chunk of concrete so that the fence dropped down again, rose to his feet and walked off down the street.

Billy waited until he was out of sight, then went over to the spot. A shallow impression had been scratched into the ground at this point, not deep enough to draw attention, but deep enough to crawl through when the bottom of the fence was propped up. He pulled the concrete into place as the other had done, looked around—no one in sight was paying any attention to him—then slipped under. There was nothing to it. He kicked the concrete away so that the fence fell, then ran quickly to the shelter of the nearest building.

There was something frightening about these acres of empty silence; he had never been this alone before, without others somewhere close by. He walked slowly now, pressed against the sunwarmed bricks of the build-

ing, pausing and peering out cautiously when he came to the corner. Ahead was a wide, debris-littered avenue of emptiness. Just as he started across there was a movement far down the street and he fell back to the wall as a grey-uniformed guard passed slowly across. When he was gone, Billy hurried in the opposite direction, taking shelter in the shadows of the rusted steel beams of a floating dry dock.

From wreckage to ruin he went on, looking for some shelter he could crawl into, to hide and sleep. There were other guards about but they were easy to spot: they stayed on the wider avenues and never came near the buildings. If he could find a way inside one of the locked structures he would be safe enough from discovery. One of them looked promising, a long, low building with a collapsed roof and glassless windows. It was sided with slabs of asbestos sheeting and many of the panels were cracked and one of them had been almost completely torn away. He came close and looked in and could see only darkness. The fallen roof was only a few feet above the floor, making a dark and silent cavern. This was just what he needed. He yawned and crawled through the opening: the big chunk of iron caught him in the side and he screamed in agony.

The darkness filled with red tongues of pain as he scrambled backwards out of the opening, hurling himself to one side. Something heavy rushed through the air next to his head and crashed into the wall, cracking and splintering it. Billy stumbled to his feet, away from the entrance, but no one tried to follow him. There was only silence within the dark opening as he hobbled away as fast as he could, favouring his side, glancing back fearfully at the building. When he turned a corner and it was out of sight he stopped and pulled up his shirt, looking at the scratched rawness just below his ribs that was already starting to turn black and blue. It didn't seem to be more than a bad bruise, but how it hurt.

Something to fight with, that's what he needed. Not that he was going back to that building—never!—he was just going to need a weapon of some kind in this place. There were shattered chunks of concrete around and he picked up one that fitted into his hand, and even had a

broken stub of rusty reinforcing rod sticking out of it. Lots of other people must have had the idea to hide in here, he should have known that when he saw the guy who came out under the fence. They stayed out of sight of the guards, that seemed easy enough to do. Then they found a place and took it over, keeping anyone else out, that's how it would be. There might be a way into every one of these buildings, and there might be someone hiding in each one. He shivered as he thought of this and pressed his hand to his sore side and moved away from the shelter of the building. Maybe he should get out of here while he was still in one piece? But this was too good a spot to leave. If he did find a place to hole up it would be perfect, just what he needed. He should look around some more before he got out. And find something better than this lump of concrete to fight with. He searched as he walked and realized that, in spite of the ruined and crumbled landscape, there was nothing lying about that was small and handy enough to use for a weapon. As though many others had been through here before him, bent on the same mission. Clutching the concrete tighter, he limped on.

A little later, he wanted to escape this collapsing and rusted jungle, but he had lost his way and could not get out. The sun was hot on the top of his head, bouncing up from the cracked pavement around him. He walked along the brink of a vast and silent dry dock, empty and forgotten, a canyon of scrap-littered silence, feeling like an insect crawling along the edge of the world. Beyond was the oily rush of the East River cutting him off from the distant towers of Manhattan: his side hurt when he breathed and loneliness was a weight pressing down on his shoulders.

A dismantled ship rested on blocks at the edge of the water from which it had been reluctantly pulled, its skin peeled off by the wreckers and its rusting ribs standing like the skeleton of a dead sea monster. The work had never been finished: the after part of the ship was almost intact, while some of the deckhouse and the stern were still untouched. There were no openings at ground level, the ship had been a tanker and the transverse bulkhead was still in place, but high above were portholes and a doorway. It wouldn't be hard to climb the framework

and Billy wondered if anyone had been there before him. They might, they might not, there was no way to tell. He had to rest and the ship made him think of home. He had to try some place. Carrying the chunk of concrete made climbing difficult, but he still took it with him.

In front of the deckhouse door there remained only a jagged-edged piece of deck, just a few feet wide. Billy pulled himself up onto this and faced the doorless opening to the cabin, holding the concrete ready.

"Is anyone there?" he called softly. The circular openings that had once contained portholes threw beams of light into the interior, bright spots on the deck that made the surrounding darkness more intense. "Hello," Billy called again, but there was only silence.

Reluctantly, he advanced through the doorway and into the blackness of the room. No one struck at him this time. Nothing moved and he blinked his eyes, dimmed by the bright sunlight outside, at a dark shape, but it was only a pile of rubbish. There was another pile in the far corner, and he had to look at it twice before he realized that it was a man, squatting against the wall with his legs pulled up before him, looking intently at Billy.

"Put that thing down, the thing in your hand," the man said in a hushed voice, almost a whisper. He reached out a long arm and clanged a twisted length of pipe against the decking. Billy stared at it wide-eyed, and his side ached. He dropped the concrete.

"That's very wise," the man said, "very wise." He stood up jerkily, unfolding like a carpenter's rule, a tall man with spider-like arms, thin to the point of emaciation. When he walked into a beam of sunlight Billy saw that the skin was stretched tight across his cheekbones and almost hairless skull, while his lips were drawn back to reveal long, yellow teeth. His eyes were round as a child's and of such a watery blue that they seemed almost transparent. Not empty, but more like windows to look through—with nothing to be seen on the other side. And he kept staring at Billy, swinging the pipe slowly, saying nothing, his lips pulled away from his teeth in an expression that might have been a grin, but also might be something else, very different.

When Billy took a slow step back towards the doorway

the end of the pipe twitched out and stopped him. "What do you want here?" the whisper asked.

"I don't want anything, I'm going——"

"What do you want?"

"I was just looking for a place to lie down, I'm tired, I don't want any trouble."

"What is your name?" the voice whispered, the eyes never blinked nor moved.

"Billy . . ." Why had he answered so fast! He bit his lip: Why had he given his right name?

"Do you have anything to eat, Billy?"

He started to lie, then thought better of it. He reached inside his shirt. "Here, I got some weederackers. You want some? They're a little broken."

The pipe dropped to the deck and rolled away while the man stepped forward with both hands cupped before him, towering over Billy. "Cast the bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. Do you know where that comes from?" he asked.

"No—no I don't," Billy said uneasily, dropping the crackers into the outstretched hands.

"I didn't think you would," the man complained, then sat down with his back to the wall at the same spot as before. He began to eat with a steady, automatic motion. "You're a heathen, I imagine, a yellow heathen, though that doesn't matter. It will to you as to the rest of His creatures. You wish to sleep, sleep. This place is large enough for two."

"I can get out, you were here first."

"You are afraid of me, aren't you?" Billy turned away from the unchanging stare, and the man nodded. "You should not be, because we are coming very near the end of fear. Do you know what that means? Do you know the significance of this year, do you?"

Billy sat silent. He did not know what to answer. The man finished the last of the crumbs, wiped his hands on his filthy pants and sighed heavily. "You could not know. Go to sleep, there is nothing to worry about here. No one will come near to bother you, we have strict rules of property in our community. Usually it is only strangers, like you, who trespass, though the others will do it if they think it worthwhile. But they won't come here, they

know I have nothing for them to covet. You may sleep undisturbed."

It seemed impossible to even consider sleeping, no matter how tired he felt, not with this strange man watching him. Billy lay against the wall in the far corner, eyes open and alert, wondering what he should do next. The man mumbled to himself and scratched at his ribs inside his thin shirt. A high pitched hum whined in Billy's ear and he slapped at the mosquito. Another bit him on the leg and he scratched the spot. There seemed to be an awful lot of mosquitoes here. What should he do? Should he try to leave?

With a sudden start he realized that he had been asleep and that the sun was low in the west, coming almost directly in through the open doorway. He sat up in a scramble and looked around, but the cabin was empty. His side ached terribly.

The clattering, metallic sound came again, and he realized that this was what had woken him. It came from outside. He went as quietly as he could to the doorway and looked down. The man was climbing towards him, and the length of pipe he carried was scratching on the metal making the noise that had disturbed him. Billy shrank back as the man threw the pipe up ahead of him, then hauled himself over the edge and onto the strip of deck.

"The water points did not open today," he said, and held out an ancient and dented paint can that he had brought up with him. "But I found a place where there was still water from the rain yesterday. Would you like some?" Billy nodded, aware suddenly of his dry throat, and took the extended can. It was filled halfway with clear water through which the caked, green paint could be seen. The water was very sweet. "Take more," the man said. "I drank my fill when I was there."

"What is your name?" he asked as he took the can back.

Was it a trap? This man must remember his name, he didn't dare give him a different one. "Billy," he said.

"You may call me Peter. You can stay here if you like." He went inside with the can and seemed to have forgot-

ten the piece of pipe. Billy looked at it suspiciously, not sure of his ground.

"You left your pipe here," he called out.

"Bring it, if you please. I shouldn't leave it lying around. Just put it here," he said, when Billy brought it in. "I think I have another piece like that around here someplace, you can take it with you when you leave these quarters. Some of our neighbours can be dangerous."

"The guards?"

"No, they are of no importance. Their work is a sinecure, and they have no more wish to bother us than we have to bother them. As long as they do not see us we are not here, so just stay away from them. You'll find that they don't look very hard, they can collect their money without putting themselves in any danger—so why should they? Sensible men. Anything worth stealing or removing vanished years ago. The guards remain only because no one has ever decided what to do with this place and the easiest solution is just to forget about it. They are living symbols of the state of decay of our culture, just as this wasteland is a vastly more important symbol, that is why I am here." He laced his hands about his shins and leaned forward, resting his bony chin on his knees. "Do you know how many entrances there are to this place?" Billy shook his head no, wondering what Peter was talking about.

"Then I will tell you. There are *eight*—and only one is unlocked and in use by the guards. The others are closed and sealed, seven seals. Does that mean something to you? Seven seals? No, I can see it does not. But there are other signs, some hidden, some clear for any eye to see. And more will come and be revealed to us one by one. Some have been written for centuries, such as the great harlot named Babylon which never was Rome as many falsely believed. Do you know the name of the city out there?"

"Here? You mean New York?"

"Yes, that is one name, but there is another that it is called and has been called and no one protests its use, that is Babylon-on-Hudson. So you see that this is the great harlot and Armageddon will be here, that is why I have come. I was a priest once, would you believe that?"

"Yes, sure," Billy said and he yawned, looking around the walls and out the doorway.

"A priest of the Church should speak the truth and I did and they cast me out for it, and they are the same ones who tempt the Antichrist into their chambers. The college of cardinals has advised the Holy Father to withdraw his ban on the destruction of infant life, and he considers it, when the truth of God's law is all about us. He said be fruitful and multiply and we have, and He gave us the intelligence to make the sick well and the weak strong, and that is where the truth lies. The millennium is here, now, upon us, a populous world of souls awaiting His call. *This* is the true millennium. False prophets said it was the year one thousand, but there are more people here in this single city than there were in the entire world at that time. *Now* is the hour, we can see it nearing, we can read the signs. The world can hold no more, it will crack asunder the weight of the masses of people—but it will *not* crack until the seven trumpets blast, this New Year, Century Day. Then we will have the reckoning."

When he stopped the thin whine of mosquitoes was loud in the still air and Billy swatted his leg, killing one and leaving a thick splotch of blood that he brushed away with the heel of his hand. Peter's arm was in the sun and Billy could see the welts and scabs of old bites that covered it.

"I've never seen so many mosquitoes as you got around here," Billy said. "And in the daytime. I never got bitten in the daytime before." He stood up and prowled about the debris-littered chamber, walking to get away from the droning insects, kicking at dirt-stiffened rags and pieces of crumbling wood. In the centre of the rear bulkhead was a heavy steel door, standing open a few inches. "What's in here?" he asked.

Peter did not hear, or pretended not to hear, and Billy pushed against the door, but the hinges were rusted into position and it would not move. "Don't you know what's in here?" he asked again in a louder voice, and Peter stirred and turned. "No," he said, "I have never looked."

"It's been closed a long time, there might be stuff in

there we could use, you never can tell. Let's see if we can open it."

Pushing together, and using the length of steel pipe as a lever, they managed to move it a few inches more until the opening was wide enough to slip through. Billy went first and his foot rattled against something on the deck: he picked it up.

"Look at that, I said we would find something. I can sell it or just hold onto it for a while." It was a steel crowbar, over a yard long, abandoned here by some workman years before. It was coated with rust on the surface, but was still sound. He put the curved and sharpened end into the opening of the door next to the hinges and threw his weight onto the other end: the rusty hinges squealed and the door opened all the way. There was a small platform on the other side with metal steps falling away from it into the darkness. Billy started down slowly, holding the crowbar tightly in one hand, the railing in the other, and on the fifth step went up to his ankle in water. "It's not just dark down there—it's full of water," he said.

Peter stepped in and looked, then pointed up at two bright patches above them. "Apparently the top deck catches the rain and it drains inside through those holes there. It must have been collecting for years down here."

"That's where your mosquitoes are coming from too." The enclosed space was filled with their humming. "We can close that door and keep them out."

"Very practical," Peter agreed and looked at the dark surface below them. "It will also save our going to the water point on the other side of the fence. There is all the water we could possibly need here, more than we can ever use."

XV

"Hello, stranger," Sol said.

Shirl could hear his voice clearly through the partition that divided the two rooms. She was sitting at the window doing her nails; she dropped her manicure set onto the bed and ran to the door.

"Andy—is that you?" she called out and when she opened the door she saw him standing there, swaying a

little with fatigue. She ran to him and kissed him, and he gave her a brief kiss in return, then released her and dropped into the car seat by the table.

"I'm wiped out," he said, "No sleep since—when was it?—night before last. Did you get the water?"

"Filled both the tanks," Sol said, "and got the jerrycans filled again before it got shut off. What's going on with the water? I heard some fancy stories on the TV, but it was so much booshwah. What aren't they telling?"

"You're hurt!" Shirl called out, noticing for the first time the torn sleeve of his shirt with an edge of bandage showing below it.

"It's not much, just a scratch," Andy said and smiled. "Wounded in the line of duty—and by a pitchfork too."

"Chasing the farmer's daughter, probably. Some story," Sol snorted. "You want a drink?"

"If any of the alky is left you can cut it a bit with water. I could use it." He sipped at the drink and sat back in the chair, some of the strain went out of his face but his eyes were red with fatigue and squinted almost shut. They sat down across from him. "Don't tell anyone until the official word goes out, but there is a lot of trouble over the water—and there's bigger trouble on the way."

"Is that why you warned us?" Shirl asked.

"Yes, I heard part of it at the station on my lunch break. The trouble started with the artesian wells and pumps on Long Island, all the Brooklyn and Queens pumping stations. You know, there's a water table under the Island, and if too much water is pumped out too fast the sea water comes in, then salt water instead of fresh starts coming out of the pumps. It's been brackish for a long time now, you can taste it when it's not mixed with upstate water, but they were supposed to have figured out just how much to pump so it wouldn't get worse. There must have been a mistake or the stations have been pumping more than their quota, whatever happened it's coming out pure salt now all over Brooklyn. All the stations there have shut down and the quota coming from Croton and upstate had to be enlarged."

"The farmers been bitching anyway about the dry summer, I bet they loved this."

"No bets. They must have had it planned for a long

time because they jumped the guards on the aqueduct, they had plenty of guns and explosives, the lot that was stolen from the Albany armoury last year. There are at least ten cops dead, I don't know how many injured. They blew up at least a mile of pipe before we got through. Every hayseed in the state must have been out there trying to stop us. Not many had guns, but they were doing fine with pitchforks and axes. The riot gas cleared them out, finally."

"Then—there's no water at all for the city?" Shirl asked.

"We'll bring water in, but it's going to be very thirsty around here for a while. Go easy on the water we have, make it last. Use it for drinking or cooking, nothing else."

"But we have to wash," Shirl said.

"No we don't," Andy rubbed at his sore eyes with the heel of his hand. "The plates can be wiped off with a rag. And as for ourselves—we just stink."

"Andy!"

"I'm sorry, Shirl. I'm being awful and I know it. But you have to realize that things are just that serious. We can go without washing for a while, it won't kill us, and when the water is connected up again we can all have a good scrub. It's something to look forward to."

"How long do you think it will be?"

"There's no way to tell yet. The repairs will take a lot of concrete and reinforcing rods, these are both on top priority, mixing machines, things like that. Meanwhile most of the water will have to come in by railroad tank cars, tank trucks and barges. There is going to be one hell of a problem with distribution and rationing, you can count on things getting worse before they get better." He dragged himself to his feet and yawned deeply. "I'm going to sack out for two hours, Shirl. Will you wake me up by four in the latest, I have to shave before I leave."

"Two hours! That's not enough sleep," she protested.

"I don't think so either—but it's all I'm getting. Someone upstairs is still pushing on the O'Brien killing. An informer in Chinatown has a lead and I have to see him today, instead of sleeping before I go on precinct patrol tonight. I am slowly developing a big hate for Billy Chung,

wherever he is hiding." He went into the other room and dropped onto the bed.

"Can I stay out here while he's sleeping, Sol?" she asked. "I don't want to bother him—but I don't want to bother him—but I don't want to bother you either——"

"Bother! Since when has a good-looking *chachka* been a bother? Let me tell you, I may look old but that's just because of my age. Not that I'm saying you ain't safe around me, the years for action have passed. I get my kicks now just thinking about it, which is cheaper anyway and you don't have to worry about getting a dose. Bring out your knitting and I'll tell you about the time I was stationed in Laredo and I and Luke took a weekend pass and stayed in Boys Town in Nuevo Laredo, though on second thought maybe I better not tell you that one."

When Shirl went in Andy was sound asleep, sprawled across the bed fully dressed; he hadn't even taken his shoes off. She pulled down the curtain and darkened the room, then took her manicure set off the foot of the bed. There was a hole worn in the sole of his right shoe and it stared at her like a mournful, dusty eye. If she tried to take his shoes off she knew it would only disturb him, so she went out quietly and closed the door.

"Batteries need charging," Sol said, holding the hydrometer up to the light and squinting at the float through the glass barrel. "Has Andy corked off yet?"

"He's sound asleep."

"Wait until you try to wake him up. When he goes off like that you could drop a bomb and if it didn't kill him he wouldn't hear it. I'll run the batteries up, he'll never know it."

"It's not fair," Shirl burst out suddenly. "Why should Andy have to do two jobs at the same time and be the one to get hurt, fighting for the water for the people in the city? What are all these people doing here? Why don't they go somewhere else if there isn't enough water?"

"For that there is a simple answer—there's no place to go. This whole country is one big farm and one big appetite. There's just as many people down South as there is up North and, since there is no public transportation, anyone who tried to walk to the land of sunshine would

starve to death long before he got there. People stay put because the country is organized to take care of them where they are. They don't eat well, but at least they eat. It needs a big catastrophe like the water failures in the California valleys to move people out, or the Dust Bowl—which I hear has now become international and crossed the Canadian border."

"Well, other countries then. Everyone came to America from Europe and places. Why don't some of them go back?"

"Because if you think you got problems you should see the other guy. All of England is just one big city and I saw on TV where the last Tory got shot defending the last grouse woods when they came to plough it up. Or you want to go to Russia maybe? Or China? They been having a border war for fifteen years now, which is one way of keeping the population down—but you're draft age and they draft girls there so you wouldn't like that. Denmark maybe. Life is great there if you can get in, at least they eat regular, but they got a concrete wall right across Jutland and beach guards who shoot on sight because so many starving people keep trying to break into the promised land. No, maybe we got no paradise here, but it's at least livable. I got to run up the batteries."

"It's not fair, I still say that."

"What's fair?" Sol smiled at her. "Relax. You got your youth, you got your looks, you're eating and drinking regular. So what's your complaint?"

"Nothing, really." She smiled back at him. "It's just that I get so angry seeing Andy working all the time, taking care of people and they don't even know it or care."

"Gratitude you can't expect, a salary you can. It's a job."

Sol dragged out the wheelless bicycle and hooked up the wires from the generator to the ranked batteries on top of the refrigerator. Shirl pulled a chair over to the window and opened her manicure set on the sill. Behind her the creaking moan of the generator rose to a high-pitched wine. She pushed at her cuticle with the orange stick. It was a nice day, sunny but not hot, and it promised to be a nice fall. There was the trouble with the water, but that would straighten out. She frowned a little as she

looked out across the roofs and high buildings, only half aware of the endless background roar of the city, cut through by the nearby shrieks of children.

Outside of this business with the water, everything was all right. But it was funny, even though she knew that things were all right, she still had this little knot of tension, a nagging feeling of worry that just wouldn't go away.

PART TWO

1

"Everyone says this is the coldest October ever, I never seen a colder one. And the rain too, never hard enough to fill the reservoir or anything, but just enough to make you wet so you feel colder. Ain't that right?"

Shirl nodded, hardly listening to the words, but aware by the rising intonation of the woman's voice that a question had been asked. The line moved forward and she shuffled a few steps behind the woman who had been speaking—a shapeless bundle of heavy clothing covered with a torn plastic raincoat, with a cord tied about her middle so that she resembled a lumpy sack. Not that I look much better, Shirl thought, tugging the fold of blanket further over her head to keep out the persistent drizzle. It wouldn't be much longer now, there were only a few dozen people ahead, but it had taken a lot more time than she thought it would: it was almost dark. A light came on over the tank car, glinting off its black sides and lighting up the slowly falling curtain of rain. The line moved again and the woman ahead of Shirl waddled forward pulling the child after her, a bundle as wrapped and shapeless as its mother, its face hidden by a knotted scarf, that produced an almost constant whimpering.

"Stop that," the woman said. She turned to Shirl, her puffy face a red lumpiness around the dark opening of her almost toothless mouth. "He's crying because he's been to see the doc, thinks he's sick but it's only the kwash." She held up the child's swollen, ballooning hand. "You

can tell when they swell up and get the black spots on the knees. Had to sit two weeks in the Bellevue clinic to see a doc who told me what I knew already. But that's the only way you get him to sign the slip. Got a peanut butter ration that way. My old man loves the stuff. You live on my block, don't you? I think I seen you there?"

"Twenty-sixth Street," Shirl said, taking the cap off the jerry can and putting it into her coat pocket. She felt chilled through and was sure she was catching a cold.

"That's right, I knew it was you. Stick around and wait for me, we'll walk back together. It's getting late and plenty of punks would like to grab the water, they can always sell it. Mrs. Ramirez in my building, she's a spic but she's all right, you know, her family been in the building since the World War Two. she got a black eye so swole up she can't see through it and two teeth knocked out. Some punk got her with a club and took her water away."

"Yes, I'll wait for you, that's a good idea," Shirl said, suddenly feeling very alone.

"Cards," the patrolman said and she handed him the three Welfare cards, hers, Andy's and Sol's. He held them to the light, then handed them back to her. "Six quarts," he called out to the valve man.

"That's not right," Shirl said.

"Reduced ration today lady, keep moving, there's a lot of people waiting."

She held out the jerrycan and the valve man slipped the end of a large funnel into it and ran in the water. "Next," he called out.

The jerrycan gurgled when she walked and was tragically light. She went and stood near the policeman until the woman came up, pulling the child with one hand and in the other carrying a five gallon paraffin can that seemed almost full. She must have a big family.

"Let's go," the woman said and the child trailed, mewling faintly, at the end of her arm.

As they left the Twelfth Avenue railroad siding it grew darker, the rain soaking up all the failing light. The buildings here were mostly old warehouses and factories with blank, solid walls concealing the tenants hidden away inside, the sidewalks wet and empty. The nearest street-

light was a block away. "My husband will give me hell coming home this late," the woman said as they turned the corner. Two figures blocked the sidewalk in front of them.

"Let's have the water," the nearest one said, and the distant light reflected from the knife he held before him.

"No, don't! Please don't!" the woman begged and swung her can of water out behind her, away from them. Shirl huddled against the wall and saw, when they walked forward, that they were just young boys, teenagers. But they still had a knife.

"The water!" the first one said, jabbing his knife at the woman.

"Take it," she screeched, swinging the can like a weight on the end of her arm. Before the boy could dodge it caught him full in the side of the head, knocking him howling to the ground, the knife flying from his fingers. "You want some too?" she shouted, advancing on the second boy. He was unarmed.

"No, I don't want no trouble," he begged, pulling at the first one's arm, then retreating when she approached. When she bent to pick up the fallen knife, he managed to drag the other boy to his feet and half-carry him around the corner. It had only taken a few seconds and all the time Shirl had stood with her back to the wall, trembling with fear.

"They got some surprise," the woman crowed, holding the worn carving knife up to admire it. "I can use this better than they can. Just punks, kids." She was excited and happy. During the entire time she had never released her grip on the child's hand: it was sobbing louder.

There was no more trouble and the woman went with Shirl as far as her door. "Thank you very much," Shirl said. "I don't know what I would have done . . ."

"That's no trouble," the woman beamed. "You saw what I did to him—and who got the knife now!" She stamped away, hauling the heavy can in one hand, the child in the other. Shirl went in.

"Where have you been?" Andy asked when she pushed open the door. "I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you." It was warm in the room, with a faint

odour of fishy smoke, and he and Sol were sitting at the table with drinks in their hands.

"It was the water, the line must have been a block long. They only gave me six quarts, the ration has been cut again." She saw his black look and decided not to tell him about the trouble on the way back. He would be twice as angry then and she didn't want this meal to be spoiled.

"That's really wonderful," Andy said sarcastically. "The ration was already too small—so now they lower it even more. Better get out of those wet things, Shirl, and Sol will pour you a Gibson. His homemade vermouth has ripened and I bought some vodka."

"Drink up," Sol said, handing her the chilled glass. "I made some soup with that ener-G junk, it's the only way it's edible, and it should be just about ready. We'll have that for the first course, before—" He finished the sentence by jerking his head in the direction of the refrigerator.

"What's up?" Andy asked. "A secret?"

"No secret," Shirl said, opening the refrigerator, "just a surprise. I got these today in the market, one for each of us." She took out a plate with three, small soylent burgers on it. "They're the new ones, they had them on TV, with the smokey-barbecue flavour."

"They must have cost a fortune," Andy said. "We won't eat for the rest of the month."

"They're not as expensive as all that. Anyway, it was my own money, not the budget money I used."

"It doesn't make any difference, money is money. We could probably live for a week on what these things cost."

"Soup's on," Sol said, sliding the plates onto the table. Shirl had a lump in her throat so she couldn't say anything: she sat and looked at her plate and tried not to cry.

"I'm sorry," Andy said. "But you know how prices are going up—we have to look ahead. City income tax is higher, eighty percent now, because of the raised Welfare payment, so it's going to be rough going this winter. Don't think I don't appreciate it . . ."

"If you do, so why don't you shut up right there and eat your soup?" Sol said.

"Keep out of this, Sol," Andy said.

"I'll keep out of it when you keep the fight out of my room. Now come on, a nice meal like this, it shouldn't be spoiled."

Andy started to answer him, then changed his mind. He reached over and took Shirl's hand. "It is going to be a good dinner," he said. "Let's all enjoy it."

"Not that good," Sol said puckering his mouth over a spoonful of soup. "Wait until you try this stuff. But the burgers will take the taste out of our mouths."

There was silence after that while they spooned up the soup, until Sol started on one of his Army stories about New Orleans and it was so impossible they had to laugh, and after that things were better. Sol shared out the rest of the Gibsons while Shirl served the burgers.

"If I was drunk enough this would almost taste like meat," Sol announced, chewing happily.

"They are good," Shirl said. Andy nodded agreement. She finished the burger quickly and soaked up the juice with a scrap of weederacker, then sipped at her drink. The trouble on the way home with the water already seemed far distant. What was it the woman has said was wrong with the child?

"Do you know what 'kwash' is?" she asked.

Andy shrugged. "Some kind of disease, that's all I know. Why do you ask?"

"There was a woman next to me in line for the water, I was talking to her. She had a little boy with her who was sick with this kwash. I don't think she should have had him out in the rain, sick like that. And I was wondering if it was catching."

"That you can forget about," Sol said. "Kwash is short for kwashiorkor. If, in the interest of good health, you watched the medical programmes like I do, or opened a book, you would know all about it. You can't catch it because it's a deficiency disease like beriberi."

"I never heard of that either," Shirl said.

"There's not so much of that, but, there's plenty of kwash. It comes from not eating enough protein. They used to have it only in Africa but now they got it right across the whole U.S. Isn't that great? There's no meat around, lentils and soybeans cost too much, so the mamas

stuff the kids with weederackers and candy, whatever is cheap . . ."

The light bulb flickered, then went out. Sol felt his way across the room and found a switch in the maze of wiring on top of the refrigerator. A dim bulb lit up, connected to his batteries. "Needs a charge," he said, "but it can wait until morning. You shouldn't exercise after eating, bad for the circulation and digestion."

"I'm sure glad you're here, doctor," Andy said. "I need some medical advice. I've got this trouble. You see—everything I eat goes to my stomach . . ."

"Very funny, Mr. Wiseguy. Shirl, I don't see how you put up with this joker."

They all felt better after the meal and they talked for a while, until Sol announced he was turning off the light to save the juice in the batteries. The small bricks of sea-coal had burned to ash and the room was growing cold. They said good-night and Andy went in first to get his flashlight: their room was even colder than the other.

"I'm going to bed," Shirl said. "I'm not really tired, but it's the only way to keep warm."

Andy flicked the overhead light switch uselessly. "The current is still off and there are some things I have to do. What is it—a week now since we had any electricity in the evening?"

"Let me get into bed and I'll work the flash for you—will that be all right?"

"It'll have to do."

He opened his notepad on top of the dresser, lay one of the reusable forms next to it, then began copying information into the report. With his left hand he kept a slow and regular squeezing on the flashlight that produced steady illumination. The city was quiet tonight with the people driven from the streets by the cold and the rain: the whirr of the tiny generator and the occasional squeak of the styfo on plastic sounded unnaturally loud. There was enough light from the flash for Shirl to get undressed by. She shivered when she took off her outer clothes and quickly pulled on heavy winter pyjamas, a much-darned pair of socks she used for sleeping in, then put her heavy sweater on top. The sheets were cold and damp, they

hadn't been changed since the water shortage, though she did try to air them out as often as she could.

"What are you writing up?" she asked.

"Everything I have on Billy Chung, they're still after me to find him—it's the most stupid thing I ever heard of." He slammed the stylo down and paced angrily back and forth, the flashlight in his hand throwing twisting shadows across the ceiling. "We've had two dozen killings in the precinct since O'Brien was murdered. We caught one killer while his wife was still bleeding to death—but all of the other murders have been forgotten, almost the same day they happened. What can be so important about Big Mike? No one seems to know—yet they still want reports. So after I put in a double shift I'm expected to keep on looking for the kid. I should be out tonight, running down another phony spotting report, but I'm not going to—even though Grassy will ream me out tomorrow. Do you know how much sleep I've been getting lately?"

"I know," she said softly.

"A couple of hours a night—if that. Well tonight I'm going to catch up. I have to sign in again by seven in the morning, there's another protest rally in Union Square, so I won't get much sleep anyway." He stopped pacing and handed her the flashlight which dimmed, then brightened again as she worked the lever. "I'm making all the noise—but you're really the one who should be complaining, Shirl. You had it a lot better before you ever met me."

"It's bad for everyone this fall, I've never seen anything like it. First the water, now this thing about a fuel shortage, I don't understand it . . ."

"That's not what I mean, Shirl—will you shine the light on this drawer." He took out a can of oil and his cleaning kit, spreading the contents out on a rag on the floor next to the bed. "It's about you and me personally. Things here aren't up to the standards you've been used to."

She skirted around mentioning her stay with Mike just as carefully as he did. It was something they never talked about. "My father's place is in a neighbourhood just like this one," she said. "Things aren't that different."

"I'm not talking about that." He squatted and broke

open his revolver, then ran the cleaning brush back and forth through its barrel. "After you left home things went a lot better for you, I know that. You're a pretty girl, more than just pretty, there must have been a lot of guys who were running after you." He spoke haltingly, looking at his work.

"I'm here because I want to be here," she said, putting into words what he had not been able to say. "Being attractive makes things easier for a girl, I know that, but it doesn't make everything all right. I want, I don't know exactly, happiness I suppose. You helped me when I really needed help and we had more fun than I ever had before in my life. I never told you before, but I was hoping you would ask me to come here, we got along so well."

"Is that the only reason?"

They had never talked about this since the night he had asked her here, and now he wanted to know all about her feelings without revealing any of his own.

"Why did you ask me here, Andy? What were your reasons?" She avoided his question.

He clicked the cylinder back into the gun without looking up at her, and spun it with his thumb. "I liked you—liked you a lot. In fact, if you want to know," he lowered his voice as though the words were shameful, "I love you."

Shirl didn't know what to say and the silence lengthened. The dynamo in the flashlight whirled and on the other side of the partition there was a creaking of springs and a subdued grunt as Sol climbed into bed.

"What about you, Shirl," Andy said, in a low voice so Sol wouldn't hear them. He raised his face for the first time and looked at her.

"I . . . I'm happy here, Andy, and I want to be here. I haven't thought much more about it."

"Love, marriage, kids? Have you thought about those things?" There was a sharp edge to his voice now.

"Every girl thinks about things like that, but . . ."

"But not with a slob like me in a broken-down rattap like this, is that what you mean?"

"Don't put words into my mouth, I didn't say that or even think it. I'm not complaining—except maybe about the awful hours you're away."

"I have my job to do."

"I know that—it's just that I never see you any more. I think we were together more in those first weeks after I met you. It was fun."

"Spending loot is always fun, but the world can't be like that all the time."

"Why not? I don't mean all the time, but just once in a while or in the evenings, or even a Sunday off. It seems like weeks since we have even talked together. I'm not saying it has to be romance all the time . . ."

"I have my job. Just how much romance do you think there would be in living if I gave it up?"

Shirl found herself close to tears. "Please, Andy, honey—I'm not trying to fight with you. That's the last thing I want. Don't you understand . . . ?"

"I understand damn well. If I was a big man in the syndicate and running girls and hemp and LSD, things might be different. But I'm just a crummy cop trying to hold things together while the rest of the bastards are taking them apart."

He stabbed the bullets into the cylinder while he talked, not looking at her and not seeing the silent tears that ran down her face. She hadn't cried at the dinner table, but she could not stop it now. It was the cold weather, the boy with the knife, the water shortage, everything—and now this.

When she laid the flashlight on the floor the light faded and almost went out as the flywheel slowed. Before it brightened again in his hand she had turned her face to the wall and had pulled the covers up over her head.

She did like Andy, she knew that—but did she love him? It was so hard to decide anything when she hardly ever saw him. Why didn't he understand that? She wasn't trying to hide anything or avoid anything. Yet her life wasn't with him, it was in this terrible room where he hardly ever came, living on this street, the people, that boy with the knife . . . she bit into her lip but could not stop crying.

When he came to bed he did not say anything, and she did not know what she could say. It was warmer with him there, though she could still smell the gun oil, it must

have got on his hands and he could not wipe it all off, and when he was close she felt much better.

She touched his arm and whispered *Andy*, but by then it was too late. He was sound asleep.

2

"I smell trouble brewing." Detective Steve Kulozik said as he finished adjusting the headband in the fibre-glass helmet. He put it on and scowled out unhappily from under the projecting edge.

"You smell trouble!" Andy shook his head. "What a wonderful nose you got. They have the whole precinct, patrolmen and detectives, mixed together, like shock troops. We're issued helmets and riot bombs at seven in the morning, locked in here without any orders—and you smell trouble. What's your secret Steve?"

"A natural talent," the fat detective said placidly.

"Let's have your attention here," the captain shouted. The voices and foot shuffling died away and the ranks of men were silent, looking expectantly towards the far end of the big room where the captain stood.

"We're going to have some special work today," the captain said, "and Detective Dwyer here, of the Headquarters Squad, will explain it to you."

There was an interested stir as the men in the back rows tried to see past the ranks ahead of them. The Headquarters Squad were trouble shooters, they worked out of the Centre Street and took their orders directly from Detective Inspector Ross.

"Can you men in the rear there hear me?" Dwyer called out, then climbed onto a chair. He was a broad, bulky man with the chin and wrinkled neck of a bulldog, his voice a hoarse, bass rumble. "Are the doors locked, captain?" he asked. "What I have to say is for these men alone?" There was a mumbled reassurance and he turned back to face them, looking over the rows of uniformed patrolmen and the drab-coated detectives in the rear.

"There's going to be a couple of hundred—or maybe a couple of thousand—people killed in this city by tonight," he said. "Your job is to keep that figure as low as possible. When you go out of here you better realize that

there are going to be riots and trouble today and the faster you act to break them up the easier it's going to be for all of us. The Welfare stations won't open today and there won't be any food issued for at least three days."

His voice rose sharply over the sudden hum of voices. "Knock that noise off! What are you—police officers or a bunch of old women? I'm giving this to you straight so you can get ready for the worst, not just yak-yak about it." The silence was absolute.

"All right. The trouble has been coming for days now, but we couldn't act until we knew where we stood. We know now. The city has gone right along issuing full food rations until the warehouses are almost empty. We're going to close them now, build up a backlog and open again in three days. With a smaller ration—and *that* is classified and not to be repeated to anyone. Rations are going to stay small the rest of the winter, don't forget that, whatever you may hear to the contrary. The immediate cause of the shortage right now is that accident on the main line north of Albany, but that's just one of the troubles. The grain is going to start coming in again—but it still won't be enough. We had a professor from Columbia down at Centre Street to tell us about it so we could pass it on, but it gets technical and we haven't got that much time. But here's what it boils down to.

"There was a fertilizer shortage last spring, which means the crop wasn't as good as expected. There have been storms and flooding. The Dust Bowl is still growing. And there was that trouble with the poisoned soybeans from the insecticide. You all know just as much about it as I do, it was on TV. What it adds up to is that a lot of small things have piled up to make one big trouble. There have even been some mistakes made by the President's Emergency Food Planning Board and you're going to see some new faces there. So everyone in this town is going to have to tighten his belt a bit. There is going to be enough for all of us as long as we can keep law and order. I don't have to tell you what would happen if we had some real good riots, some fires, big trouble. We can't count on any outside help because the Army has got plenty of other things to worry about. It's going to be you men on foot out there that do the job. There isn't one operational hovercraft

left, they've all either got parts missing or broken impeller blades, and there aren't any replacements. It's up to you. There are thirty-five million people here counting on us. If you don't want them to starve to death—do your jobs. Now . . . any questions?"

A buzz of whispered talk swept across the crowded room, then a patrolman hesitantly raised his hand and Dwyer nodded to him.

"What about the water, sir?"

"That trouble should be licked soon. Repairs on the aqueduct are almost finished and the water should be coming through within a week. But there is still going to be rationing because of the loss of ground water from the Island, and the low level of the reservoirs. And that brings up another thing. We been putting the announcement on TV every hour and we got as many guards as we can spare along the waterfront, but people are still drinking river water. I don't know how they can—the damned river is just an open sewer by the time it reaches us, and salty from the ocean—but people do it. And they're not boiling it, which is the same as taking poison. The hospitals are filling up with typhoid and dysentery cases and God knows what else, and *that* is going to get worse before the winter is over. There are lists of symptoms posted on the bulletin boards and I want you to memorize them and keep your eyes open, get word to the Health Department about anything you see, and bring in any cases you think will get away. Keep your shots up to date and you got nothing to worry about, the department has all the vaccine you're going to need." He cupped his ear towards the nearby ranks and frowned.

"I think I heard someone say 'political officer', but maybe they didn't. Let's say they didn't, but I've heard it before and you may be hearing it again yourselves. So let's get one thing straight. The Commies invented that name, and the way they use it it means a guy who pushes the Party line to the troops, sells them a snow job, a lot of crap. But that's not the way we work it in this country. Maybe I'm a political officer, but I'm levelling with you, telling you all the truth so you can get out there and do your job knowing just what has to be done. Any more questions?"

His big head looked round the room and the silence lengthened: no one else was asking the question, so Andy reluctantly raised his hand.

"Yes?" Dwyer said.

"What about the markets, sir?" Andy said, and the nearby faces turned towards him. "There's the flea market in Madison Square, they have some food there, and the Gramerey Park market."

"That's a good question, because they are going to be our sore spots today. A lot of you will be on duty in or near those markets. We are going to have trouble at the warehouses when they don't open, and there will be trouble in Union Square with the Eldsters there—they are *always* trouble." A duly appreciative laugh followed his words. "The stores are going to sell out and board up. We're taking care of that, but we can't control the markets the same way. The only food on sale in this city will be there, and people are going to realize it soon enough. Keep your eyes open and if anything starts—stop it before it can spread. You've got night sticks and you have gas, use them when you have to. You've got guns and they're best left in their holsters. We don't want indiscriminate killing, that only makes things worse."

There were no more questions. Detective Dwyer left before they had been given their assignments and they did not see him again. The rain had almost stopped when they went out, but had been replaced by a heavy, cold mist that swept in from the lower bay. There were two canvas covered trucks waiting at the kerb, and an old city bus that had been painted a dull, olive drab. Half of its windows were boarded up.

"Put 'cher fares in the box," Steve said as he followed Andy into the bus. "I wonder where they resurrected this antique from?"

"City Museum," Andy said, "The same place they got these riot bombs. Did you look at them?"

"I counted them, if that's what you mean," Steve said, swinging heavily into one of the cracked plastic seats next to Andy. They both had their satchels of bombs on their laps so there would be room to sit. Andy opened his and took out one of the green canisters.

"Read that," he said, "if you can read."

"I been to Delehanty's," Steve grunted. "I can read Irish as well as American. Grenade, pressurized—riot gas—MOA-397 . . ."

"The fine print, down at the bottom."

". . . sealed St. Louis arsenal, April 1974. So what, this stuff never gets old."

"I hope not. From what our political officer said it sounds like we might need them today."

"Nothing'll happen. Too wet for riots."

The bus shuddered to a halt on the corner where Broadway passed Worth Square and Lieutenant Grassioli pointed at Andy and jerked his thumb towards the door. "You're interested in markets, Rusch, take the beat from here down to Twenty-third. You too, Kulozik."

Behind them the door creaked shut and the bus pushed slowly away through the crowds. They streamed by on all sides, jostling and bumping into each other without being aware of it, a constantly changing, but ever identical sea of people. An eddy formed naturally around the two detectives, leaving a small cleared area of wet pavement in the midst of the crowd. Police were never popular, and policemen in helmets, carrying yard long, lead filled riot clubs, were to be avoided even more. The cleared space moved with them as they crossed Fifth Avenue to the Eternal Light, now extinguished because of the fuel shortage.

"Almost eight," Andy said, his eyes moving constantly over the people around them. "That's when the Welfare stations usually open. I suppose the announcement will go on TV at the same time."

They went slowly towards Twenty-third Street, walking in the street because the clustering stalls of the flea market had pushed outwards until they covered most of the sidewalk.

"Hubcaps, hubcaps, I got all the best," a merchant droned as they passed, a small man who was almost lost in the ravelling folds of an immense overcoat, his shaved head projecting above the collar like a vulture's from a ruff of matted feathers. He rubbed his dripping nose with cracked knuckles and appeared to be a little feeble-minded. "Get'cher hubcaps here, officer, all the best, make good

bowls, pots, soup-pots, night-pots, make good anything. . .” They passed out of earshot.

By nine o'clock there was a different feeling in the air, a tension that had not been there before. The crowd seemed to have a louder voice and to be stirring about faster, like water about to boil. When the detectives passed hubcap stall again they saw that most of the stock had been locked away and the few hubcaps left on the counter were rusty and scarcely worth stealing. Their owner crouched among them no longer shouting his wares, unmoving except for his darting eyes.

“Did you hear that?” Andy asked, and they both turned towards the market. Above the rising hum of voices there was an angry shout, followed by others. “Let’s take a look,” Andy said, pushing into one of the narrow paths that threaded through the market.

A shouting crowd was jammed solid between the stalls and pushcarts, blocking their way, and only stirred without moving aside when they blew their whistles. The clubs worked better, they rapped at the barricades of ankles and legs and a reluctant opening was made for them. At the centre of the mob were three crumb stands, one of them knocked off its legs and half overturned, with bags of weedcrumbs dribbling to the ground.

“They been jacking the price!” a thin-faced harridan screamed. “Against the law jacking the price. They asking double for crumbs.”

“No law says, we can ask what we want,” a stall owner shouted back, clearing the area in front of him with wild swings of an old connecting rod. He was ready to defend with his life his stock of broken bits of weedcracker. Weedcrumbs, the cheapest and most tasteless nourishment ever consumed by man.

“You got no rights, crumby, those prices don’t go!” a man called out, and the crowd heaved and surged.

Andy blasted on his whistle. “Hold on!” he shouted above the voice of the mob. “I’ll settle this—just hold on.” Steve stood and faced the angry crowd, swinging his club before him, as Andy turned to the stall owner and talked in a low voice. “Don’t be stupid. Ask a fair price and sell your stock out . . .”

“I can ask any price I want. There ain’t no law——” he

protested and broke off when Andy slammed his club against the side of the stall.

"That's right—there's no law unless the law is standing right here. Do you want to lose everything, including your own stupid head? Fix a price and sell out, because if you don't I'm just going to walk away from here and let these people do whatever they want."

"He's right, Al," the crumby from the next stall said, he had sidled over to listen to Andy. "Sell out and get out, they gonna walk all over us if we don't. I'm knocking the price back."

"You're a jerk—look at the loot!" Al protested.

"Balls! Look at the hole in my head if we don't. I'm selling."

There was still a lot of noise, but as soon as the crumbies started selling at a lower price there were enough people who wanted to buy so that the unity of the crowd broke up. Other shouts could be heard, on the Fifth Avenue side of the Square.

"This'll keep here," Steve said. "Let's get circulating."

Most of the stalls were locked now and there were gaps between them where the pushcart owners had closed up and moved shop. A tattered woman was sprawled, sobbing, in the wreckage of her beanwich stall, her stock, cooked beans pressed between weedcrackers, looted and gone.

"Lousy cops," she choked out when they passed. "Why didn't you stop them, do something? Lousy cops." They went by without looking at her, out into Fifth Avenue. The crowd was in a turmoil and they had to force their way through.

"Do you hear that, coming north?" Steve asked. "Sounds like singing or shouting."

The surging of the crowd became more directed, taking on a unity of movement heading uptown. Each moment the massed chanting grew louder, punctuated by the stentorian rasp of an amplified voice.

*"Two, four six, eight—Welfare rations come too late.
Three, five, seven, nine—Medicare is still behind."*

"It's the Eldsters," Andy said, "They're marching on Times Square again."

"They picked the right day for it—everything is happening today."

As the crowd pressed back to the kerb the first marchers appeared, preceded by a half-dozen uniformed patrolmen, their clubs swinging in easy arcs before them. Behind them was the first wave of the elderly legion, a grey-haired, balding, group of men led by Ked Reeves. He limped a bit as he walked, but he stayed out in front, carrying a compact, battery-operated bullhorn: a grey metal trumpet with a microphone set into the end. He raised it to his mouth and his amplified voice boomed over the noise of the crowd.

"All you people there on the kerbs, join in. March with us. Join this protest, raise your voices. We're not marching for ourselves alone, but for all of you as well. If you are a senior citizen you are with us in your heart because we're marching to help you. If you are younger you must know that we are marching to help your mother and father, to get the help that you yourself will need one day . . ."

People were being pushed in from the mouth of Twenty-fourth Street, being driven across the path of the marchers, looking back over their shoulders as the force of the crowd behind them drove them forward. The Eldsters' march slowed to a crawl, then stopped completely in a jumble of bodies. Police whistles shrilled in the distance and the policemen who had been marching in front of the Eldsters fought vainly to stop the advance, but were swallowed up and lost in a moment as the narrow exit from Twenty-fourth street disgorged a stampede of running figures. They crashed into the crowd and merged with the advance guard of the Eldsters.

"Stop there, stop!" Reeves amplified shout boomed out. "You are interfering with this march, a legal march . . ." The newcomers pushed against him and a heavyset man, streaked with blood on the side of his head, grabbed for the bullhorn. "Give me that!" he ordered and his words were amplified and mixed with Reeves' in a thunderous jumble.

Andy could clearly see what was happening, but could do nothing to stop it since the crowd had separated him

from Steve and carried him back against the quaking row of stalls.

"Give it to me!" the voice bellowed again, overrode by a scream from Reeves as the bullhorn was twisted violently from his hands.

"They're trying to starve us!" the amplified sound hammered across the crowd: white faces turned towards it. "The Welfare station is full of food but they locked it up, won't give us any. Open it up and get the food out! Let's open it up!"

The crowd roared agreement and surged back into Twenty-fourth Street, trampling over many of the Eldsters, pushing them to the ground, driven on by the rancorous voice. The crowd was turning into a mob and the mob would turn into a riot if they were not stopped. Andy lashed out with his club at the people nearby, forcing his way through them, trying to get close enough to the man with the bullhorn so that he could stop him. A group of Eldsters had locked arms about their injured leader, Reeves, who was shouting something unheard in the uproar, holding his right forearm in his left hand to protect it: it dangled at an odd angle, broken. Andy flailed out but saw that he would never get through, the mob was surging away, faster than he could move.

"——keeping the food for themselves—anyone ever see a skinny cop! And the politicians, they're eating our food and they don't care if we starve!" The nagging boom of the voice drove the crowd closer and closer to riot. People, mostly Eldsters, had already fallen and been trampled. Andy tore open his satchel and grabbed out one of the riot bombs. They were timed to explode and release their clouds of gas three seconds after the fuse was pulled. Andy held the bomb low, tore out the ring, then hurled it straight-armed towards the man with the bullhorn. The green canister arched high and fell into the crowd next to him. It didn't go off.

"Bombs!" the man bellowed. "The cops are trying to kill us so we don't get that food. They can't stop us—let's go—let's get it! Bombs!"

Andy cursed and tore out another gas grenade. This one had better work, the first one had only made things worse. He pushed the nearest people away with his club to

make room to swing, pulled the pin and counted to two before he threw.

The canister exploded with a dull thud almost on top of the man with the stolen bullhorn, the tearing sound of his retching cut across the roar of voices. The crowd surged, its unity of purpose lost as people tried to flee the cloud of vapour, blinded by the tear gas, with their guts twisted by the regurgitants. Andy tore the gas mask from the bottom of his satchel and swiftly and automatically put it on by gas drill procedure. His helmet slid down his left arm, hanging from its strap, while he used both hands, thumbs inside, to shake out the mask and free the headstraps. Holding his breath he bent his head and tucked his chin into the mask and, with a single swift motion, pulled the straps over his head that held the mask in place. His right palm sealed the exhaust valve over his mouth as he expelled the air violently from his lungs, it rushed out of the vibrating sides of the mask clearing away any traces of gas. Even as he did this he was straightening up and putting his helmet back on with his other hand.

Though the whole operation of donning the mask had taken no more than three seconds, the scene before him had changed dramatically. People were pushing out in all directions, trying to escape from the spreading cloud of gas that drifted in a thin haze over a widening area of road. The only ones remaining were sprawled on the pavement or bent over, racked by uncontrolled vomiting. It was a potent gas. Andy ran to the man who had grabbed the bullhorn. He was down on all fours, blinded and splattered by his own disgorgement, but still holding on to the loudspeaker and cursing between racking spasms. Andy tried to take it away from him, but he fought back viciously and blindly, clutching it with a grip of death, until Andy was forced to rap him on the base of the skull with his club. He collapsed onto the fouled street and Andy pushed the bullhorn away.

This was the hardest part. He scratched the microphone with his finger and an amplified clattering rolled out; the thing was still working. Andy took a deep breath, filling his lungs against the resistance of the filters in the canister, then tore the mask from his face.

"This is the police," he said, and faces turned towards

his amplified voice. "The trouble is over. Go quietly to your homes, disperse, the trouble is over. There will be no more gas if you disperse quietly." There was change in the sound of the crowd when they heard the word 'gas', and the force of their movement began to change. Andy fought against the nausea that gripped his throat. "The police are in charge here and the trouble is over . . ."

He clutched his hand over the microphone to deaden it as he doubled over with agony and vomited.

— *to be concluded*

CRITIQUE (3)—*continued from page 3*

Kleiner wrote a screenplay from the adaptation from the story.

You may well ask at this point what all this has to do with the book by Isaac Asimov. I can only guess, but it appears that the Good Doctor was paid to write a novel based on the screenplay, to be released at the same time as the film. That is what is wrong with this Jerry-built monstrosity (apologies to Jerry Bixby): too many cooks. It all proves Harrison's Inverse Law of Artistic Creation. The more contributors, the lousier the product—to the power of the inverse square.

The book is about the fantastic voyage (say—that would make a great title for a film!) of micromicromicrominaturized submarine that cruises through a man's bloodstream to destroy a deadly clot of blood in his brain. I understand that a few million dollars have been poured into the film and I bet that voyage will look great on the screen. It also looks great in the book, which is good sf.

I can make this outrageous statement because reading sf is like panning for gold. We have learned to grab each glittering nugget with screams of joy—and to ignore all the dross about it. For the pleasure of a new idea, a wonderful twist or an exciting extrapolation, we will put up with wooden characterization, bad writing, hackneyed plot and all the rest. FANTASTIC VOYAGE contains all these factors with rich excess.

Asimov obtained his doctorate in biochemistry and has refused to do any major fictional work about this field, until now, even turning down requests from John W. Campbell. The biochemistry was worth waiting for, and the physical descriptions of the voyage and the activities inside the human body are as exciting as anything ever published in fiction or text. It is Asimov at his best, a skilled writer and an excellent author of popular scientific texts, he outdoes himself here. Read these parts and thrill! Read them and skip quickly over the inane drivel of love story, spy story, crud story in which they are set. The true sf reader will do this automatically, being well trained at the art, and will rush out to tell his friends about the great book he has just read.

It is not a great book, it just has great parts. The same might be said for all science fiction. It has great parts. But in between the shining mountain peaks lie noisome swamps.

I have a great vision, because I am a Manichean science fictionist. There is light and there is dark. There is grandeur and there is crud. If this be heresy, reach for your flaying knife. I do not agree with the Catholic sfists (P. Schuyler Miller, Sam Moskowitz) that Lovecraft and E. R. Burroughs and such belong in the hagiography just because they wrote sf and were popular. They are bad; chuck them out. I do not agree with the Ecumenical sfists such as Judy Merrill that a lot of borderline stuff is sf and should be dragged into our Church. If it's not baptized sf—chuck it out.

I'll tell you about my great vision. It is the Kingdom Come of sf where all our sins will be wiped away. The book editors will know what sf is and will print the good stuff and seek out and encourage the writers with Rich Rewards to produce what they need. The writers from the outside will not be allowed to bash out just one more world destroyed by giant clothing moths or atom bombs, but will be forced to read *all* the global destruction novels first, so they may turn their talents to untouched areas. The writers on the inside will be encouraged to write better instead of more, which will surely make some difference. The fact will be faced by everyone that just as much skill, training and talent is required to write sf as to be an engineer or a pianist—or a mixture of both.

There is a mainstream of science fiction, and in my great vision it will flow unhampered and unchecked. There is room for everything in sf, all sorts of experimentation and fantastical dreaming. But there is more room for good, solid, readable, hard-core sf, and that is what I would like to see most of all.

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